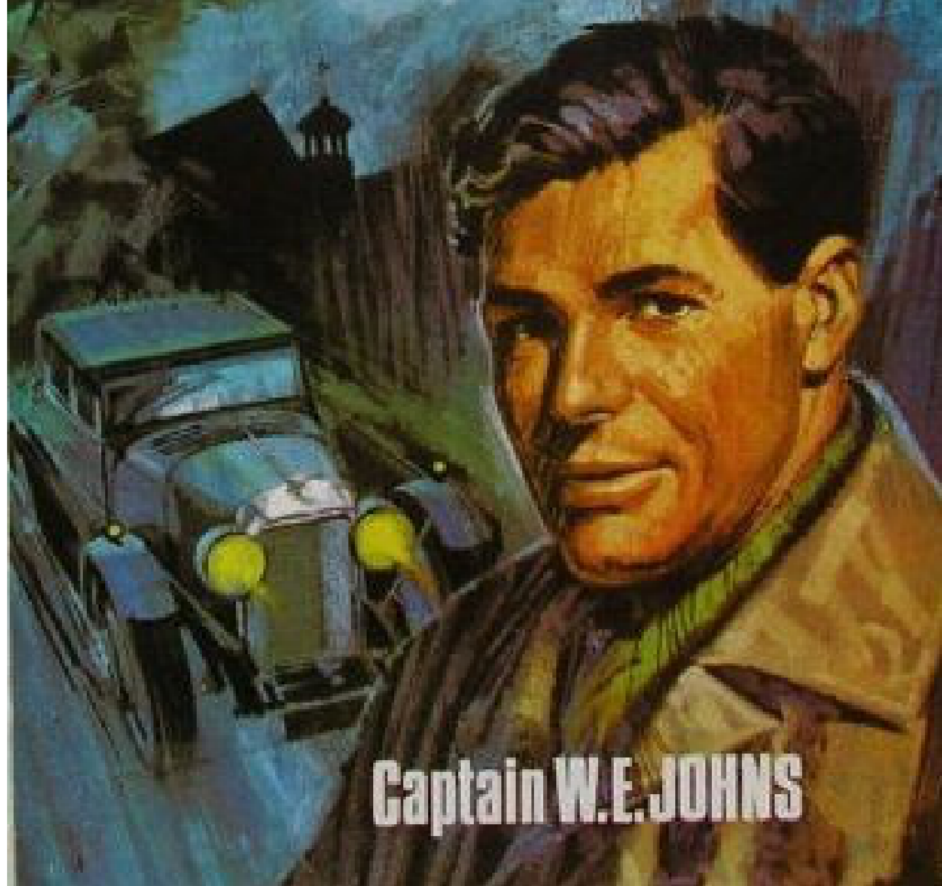


BIGGLES AND THE DARK INTRUDER



Captain W.E. JOHNS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: NO ORDINARY PROBLEM

CHAPTER 2: THE CONFERENCE

CHAPTER 3: BODMIN MOOR

CHAPTER 4: A MATTER OF DEDUCTION

CHAPTER 5: FIRST INSPECTION

CHAPTER 6: SINISTER DEVELOPMENTS

CHAPTER 7: TREED

CHAPTER 8: BERTIE BRINGS NEWS

CHAPTER 9: A SHOCK FOR BIGGLES

CHAPTER 10: A PLAN AND A PROBLEM

CHAPTER 11: MORE SURPRISES

CHAPTER 12: WHAT HAPPENED TO BERTIE

CHAPTER 13: THE PIT

CHAPTER 14: TOUGH GOING FOR GINGER

CHAPTER 15: ENTER THE INTRUDER

CHAPTER 16: EXIT THE MASTER-MIND

CHAPTER 1

NO ORDINARY PROBLEM

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR BIGGLESWORTH, CHIEF operational pilot of the Air Police based on Scotland Yard for investigation of criminal activities in Aviation, entered the office of his chief, Assistant Commissioner Air Commodore Raymond, closed the door behind him, took his customary chair in front of the desk and waited. The Air Commodore regarded him with pensive, harassed eyes. 'Good morning, Bigglesworth,' he said, without enthusiasm.

'Good morning, sir.'

'That unidentified aircraft was over again last night.'

'I know. I was in the air for hours looking for it. So were my pilots.'

'How did you know it came in?'

'I got a signal direct from the radar boys.'

'See anything?'

'Not a sign.'

The Air Commodore sat back in his chair. 'What do you make of it?'

Biggles raised a shoulder. 'What can we make of it? All I can say, from what little we know, is this. Someone is working on a well-thought-out scheme; which means that an experienced pilot, who is also a first-class navigator, comes into the picture. That much is obvious. More than that would be guesswork.'

The Air Commodore pushed forward the cigarette box. 'Well, something will soon have to be done about it,' he said wearily.

Biggles took a cigarette. 'You tell me what to do, sir, and I'll do it.'

'What can I tell you to do?'

'With respect, sir, that's your problem.'

The Air Commodore went on. 'I've just left the Air Minister. He's getting really worried.'

'What has he to worry about?'

'It's only a question of time before some member of the House of Commons gets wind of what's going on and asks a question that the Minister won't be able to answer. That could happen any day. No Minister likes to admit he doesn't know. It's a reflection on his ability. It's his business to know. In this case it would amount to an admission that our national security precautions are not what they should be.'

'Apparently they're not. Let's face it.'

'Someone will have to take the blame.'

Biggles smiled wryly. 'Yes, and I can guess who that will be.'

The Air Commodore shook his head. 'This is a serious matter, Bigglesworth. Here we have an aircraft that comes and goes as it pleases and

we're faced with the disagreeable prospect of having to admit there's nothing we can do to stop it.'

'After all, that's the plain, simple, unvarnished truth. You know it and I know it. If planes could come and go in wartime, with every anti-aircraft device in action, why shouldn't they be able to do it now? We've been over all this before. If I had a reason, I could fly over any country in Europe any night that suited me and probably get away with it. Nothing short of a major operation involving searchlights, guns and fighter aircraft could stop me. Even with all that laid on I'd probably get through. In fact, as you know, I've done it.'

'Is that what you're suggesting I tell the Air Minister?'

'That's up to you, sir. I'm stating a fact and you know it.' Biggles knocked the ash off his cigarette.

'You realize that it isn't only the Minister of Aviation who is losing sleep over this business. The Ministry of Defence, the Home Office, the War Office — they're all asking what's going on. Whatever it is, they want it stopped.'

'I can understand that; but have they put forward any suggestions for stopping it? They're the people with the power to do things.'

'It isn't practicable in peace-time, as in a war, to call in the entire anti-aircraft defences of the country — if that's what you mean. The public would wonder what was going on. Some nervous people might panic, imagining a nuclear war was on the way. Think what fools we should look if the intruder turned out to be some hen-brained youth having what he thinks is fun, taking his girl friend for a sky-ride. We should be the laughing stock of Europe.'

Biggles shook his head. That isn't the answer.'

'It might be.'

'I doubt it. A young irresponsible fellow might play such a lunatic game once, but I can't see him repeating it. An aircraft isn't a motor bike. Night flying calls for something more than nerve. This plane has been over to our certain knowledge at least six times. Anyway, I'm sure this is no ordinary game. I've checked every flying club, and the entire list of private owners, for night flying, with no result. Even if someone was taking a chance, the machine would, or should, be showing navigation lights. Moreover, should such a pilot find himself off course he'd be bawling for someone to give him his position. Not only does this pilot fly without lights but he ignores signals to identify himself.'

'His electrical equipment might have developed a fault.'

'That's always possible; but don't let's fool ourselves. Everything points to this being something more sinister than that. This plane has a definite purpose, and at present, from what little we know, to try to guess what that is would be a waste of time. I could think of several possibilities. To me, one thing sticks out like a sore finger. We're dealing with a pilot who knows the ropes and all the tricks for dodging anti-aircraft devices. Witness the fact that he has never crossed the coast twice in the same place. Which means we can't concentrate

on any one particular area. He never comes at the same time or in any particular sort of weather. There isn't much we can do with a man like that. I have four machines. They can't watch thousands of miles of coast. Not that it would make much difference if I had a hundred planes.'

'He's been tracked, but never for very far. Then he disappears. How does he manage that?'

'I'd say he glides in high with his engine cut. As soon as he realizes he's in a radar beam he comes down like a brick and gets under it. That's when we lose him. And I'll tell you something else. He has always kept clear of any of the regular air routes — B.E.A., B.O.A.C., Air France and the rest. Don't ask me to believe that's a matter of luck. He must have studied the air line timetables. He's a wily bird, whoever he may be.'

'What the devil can he be doing?'

'Without knowing where he starts his flight, or where it ends, it could be anything.'

'Could it be a smuggling racket?'

'Possibly. We know it's a small, single-engined job; but even a light plane can carry a lot of contraband. It would have to be high-value stuff to make it worth while — gold, precious stones, paper money, something of that sort. Drugs, perhaps. They're light and don't take up much room. I gather there's now quite a market here for dope — heroin, hashish and reefers. There's no longer any point in smuggling cigars, cigarettes or brandy, which used to be the coastguards' headache.'

The Air Commodore threw out his hands in a gesture of despair. 'What are we going to do about it? We shall have to do something. Of course, what the Security people are most afraid of is that this might be a way of getting spies into the country, or the information they gather, out to the people they work for.'

Biggles shrugged. 'Could be. That, I fancy, has always gone on. It went on right through the War. But this is guessing. It won't get us anywhere. We shan't know the answer until we get this crafty bird on the ground. Perhaps not then.'

'What do you mean — perhaps not then?'

'Well, if he was forced down he might set fire to his machine and disappear before anyone could get to him. If he was shot down he might go up in flames; in which case we wouldn't learn much from a few charred bits and pieces. Even then, if this business has a political angle it might not stop. We could expect the people behind it to replace the pilot and aircraft.'

'That's cold comfort, I must say,' muttered the Air Commodore.

'I agree, but it's no use blinking at a possibility because we don't happen to like it.'

'Well, what *are* we going to do? We shall soon have to do something.'

'Frankly, sir, I don't know what more we can do. I've carried out the usual routine and a lot more besides. I'll have a conference with all hands right

away. We may be able to think of a new approach to the problem.'

'For heaven's sake do something. I'm scared the Press will get hold of the story. When they growl, ministers tremble.'

'And start looking round for a scapegoat,' added Biggles cynically.

'Naturally.'

'And we can guess who it will be. Just one point about that while we're on the subject. If someone starts kicking up a fuss it's likely to do more harm than good.'

'Why? In what way?'

'It will tell the intruder his activities have been spotted and he will tighten up his precautions not to get caught. Left alone, thinking all is well, he may become careless and drop us a clue; something, anything for us to work on.'

The Air Commodore nodded. 'I take your point. Very well. I'll do my best to keep the soft pedal on the business but I can't promise to hold it down for very long. Do the best you can and don't waste any time. Call on me for anything you need. What have you actually done so far?'

'It didn't seem much use waffling about the sky night after night, haphazard, on the off-chance of meeting this fellow who's making a nuisance of himself. I haven't enough pilots or machines for that sort of lark. It seemed to me that our only hope was to know when he was over and the area he was in; so I established direct contact with the radar chaps, and the main airports, and asked them to send me a signal if they saw or heard anything. I would always have somebody standing by. Apart from that, whenever possible I've had a machine on patrol ready to move fast to the district concerned should such a signal be received. It's hard to see what more we can do.'

'And that has had no result?'

'It has worked up to a point. When Algy was out last Wednesday night he picked up a signal that the plane was over. He rushed to the place where it was said to be, but he couldn't find it. Radar lost it, too. That's what happens every time. This pilot, whoever he is and wherever he's coming from, is no novice at evading tactics. He's bound to realize that we shall be after and knows what to do about it.'

The Air Commodore nodded. 'That's pretty obvious. Naturally, a good man would be chosen for such a job. That's what makes me think this is no ordinary affair. Well, carry on. Do what you can and let me know at once if you get a line on what's happening. I'll tell the Air Minister that we're doing everything possible to put an end to this intrusion.'

'Okay, sir.' Biggles got up, left the room and returned to his own office.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONFERENCE

BACK in his own room Biggles found his three assistant pilots waiting for his news.

‘Well, what was all that about?’ questioned Algy Lacey.

‘I’ll give you one guess,’ returned Biggles lugubriously, dropping into his chair.

‘This intruder?’

‘Of course. I was expecting the balloon to go up.’

‘I suppose some official sitting with his feet up in front of the fire wants to know what we’re doing about it?’

‘The Air Minister wants to know why we *haven’t* done something about it.’

Bertie Lissie chipped in. ‘But look here, dash it all, old boy, what does he think we are — a party of wizards?’

‘He, too, has a job to do, don’t forget. He’s responsible to the Government. Don’t worry. The Chief knows our limitations and no doubt he’s explained them to the Minister.’

‘And a lot of good that’ll do if I know anything,’ put in Ginger, coldly.

‘Let ‘em call in the Air Force and see what they can do about it.’

Biggles ignored the remark. ‘We can rely on this,’ he went on. ‘If the Air Commodore gets the sack for failing to do his job properly he won’t bleat about it. I mean, he won’t try to push the blame on to us. He was a wartime pilot himself years ago so he knows what we’re up against. But instead of sitting here moaning, let’s put our heads together to see if we can hit on a scheme for nobbling this smart guy, who must think he’s got us baffled.’

‘It seems he has,’ said Ginger gloomily.

‘Not yet,’ disputed Biggles. ‘Take it from me, he’ll play his trick once too often, get careless and make a boob.’

‘Fair enough. Where do we start?’ inquired Algy.

‘We’ll start with you,’ answered Biggles. ‘You were the last man to get a line on his track. Get out the file, Ginger.’

Ginger produced it and laid it open on Biggles’ desk.

Biggles went on, speaking to Algy. ‘Three days ago, when you came in you told me what had happened, but let’s go over it again rather more carefully to see if we can get a line, if only a rough indication, of what goes on. This plane has been over six times to our certain knowledge — maybe more — and always manages to do the disappearing act.’

Biggles took from the file a sheet of paper on which had been roughly sketched the outline of the south-west corner of England. He picked up a pencil and a ruler. ‘Go ahead, Algy,’ he requested.

Algy began. 'It was last Wednesday. You sent me to do a night patrol between Weymouth and Land's End. You said, if you remember, that the plane had been reported on both sides of the Cornish-Devon peninsula and it might try that area again; but as I couldn't cover both the north side and the south at the same time I'd better keep to one side or the other.'

'That's right.'

'At 2.0 a.m. I was off the Lizard heading east. It was a fair sort of night, clear, still, starlight, but no moon. There was a thin layer of alto-cirrus but on the whole I'd call it a perfect night for flying. I had climbed to eight thousand, keeping an eye on the Eddystone Light for a line, when I had a flash from London Airport to say an unidentified aircraft showing no lights was approaching the coast from the south at approximately six thousand. If it held its course it would cross the coast somewhere between St. Mawes and Fowey. London had got the tip from the coastguard station at Falmouth. They were still tracking it. Well, that wasn't far away from me, so having asked them to keep in touch and report any change of course I went flat out downhill for the area named. Having height of this mystery bird I thought I might catch up with it and spot although if it wasn't showing lights that could only more by luck than judgement. I'd have to be pretty close.'

'You had your lights on?'

'Of course.'

'Which means he'd spot you before you saw him.'

'Naturally. There I was at a disadvantage, because if was up to any dirty work, if he spotted me it wouldn't be difficult for him to give me the slip. That's what must have happened.'

'You didn't see him?'

'Not a sign. Inside five minutes, down to six thousand, I struck the coast at a little port which I took to be Mevagissey, although I couldn't be sure of that because at that hour there weren't many lights showing on the ground, and what there were were scattered. There wasn't much traffic on the road, either.'

'What made you think you were over Mevagissey?'

'I knew it was a fishing port. A number of small craft were putting out to sea and I took them to be fishing boats. Presumably the tide was right.'

'Then what?'

'I went inland for a little way, cruising up and down, searching the sky, but I couldn't find an aircraft. Then had a signal to say Falmouth had lost the plane in the region of St. Austell. It was then losing height fast.'

Biggles nodded. 'That's how he does it every time. Went down to get below the beam, I suppose. Anything else?'

'No. I hung about for as long as my petrol would allow; then I came home.'

'You didn't by any chance see any lights on the ground that might have marked a landing area?'

'Nothing like that.'

‘May I butt in?’ asked Bertie.

‘What is it?’

‘I know Cornwall pretty well, and I was only going to say that if this perisher dived below the beam near St Austell he’d have to keep his eyes skinned or he’d bump into the Cornish Alps. He wouldn’t be likely to land there.’

Biggles looked puzzled. ‘What are you talking about? There aren’t any alps in Cornwall.’

‘Aren’t there, by Jove! That’s what they call ‘em.’

‘Do you mean *mountains*?’

‘Pretty nearly. And they keep their snow all the year round. They’re whiter than white. I’m talking about the china clay workings. They pile the stuff they don’t want in tips running to hundreds of feet high, some of ‘em. They look like the peaks of the Swiss Alps. Mention of St Austell reminded me. That’s the centre of the china clay industry. That’s where this intruder disappeared. No one but a lunatic would try to land there. But there is this about it. If a pilot needed a landmark he wouldn’t find a better one than these artificial mountains. They’re white and they shine. Moreover, they’re the only ones in the country.’

‘Thank you, Bertie,’ acknowledged Biggles. ‘You see the advantage of several heads working together. We’ll keep that in mind.’ With the pencil he drew a line on his map. ‘At all events, if this machine held on its track its objective must have been somewhere in the centre of Cornwall. That ties up with previous reports. All tracks so far known converge on that area. The R.A.F. base at Milford Haven picked up an unknown plane in the Bristol Channel area. It was heading in the same direction.’

Algy spoke. ‘If it was over the Bristol Channel where did it start from? Somewhere out in the Atlantic?’

‘Could be, if it was based on an aircraft carrier. I must admit that doesn’t seem very likely, because if there was a foreign aircraft carrier hanging about our coast the Admiralty would know about it, and want to know what it was doing. But for the moment never mind about where the plane starts from. What we want to know, as it crosses the coast, is where it is going and for what purpose. As far as we can make out, every time it has been picked up an extension of its track would have taken it to about the middle of Cornwall. It doesn’t follow that the machine landed there. It could have dropped something and then made for home. But mark this. Whether it landed or simply flew over the objective, there must have been a confederate waiting on the ground either to show the position of the dropping area or to collect what the plane came over to deliver.’

‘It seems to me,’ said Ginger, ‘it’s time we had a close look at the middle of Cornwall.’

‘It’s a big lump of land to watch. Come on, Bertie. You’re the expert on the county. Can you narrow down the most likely areas to search, or to keep

an eye on?’

Bertie answered. ‘I can tell you this. It’s all pretty hilly, and there aren’t all that number of places for a machine to get on the carpet, anyway at night. It’s true that on the north side of the county there’s plenty of open ground, by which I mean there are not so many trees there, so I’m told, being discouraged by the Atlantic gales. The south side is different. It’s well wooded and at the same time pretty hilly. Of course, there’s Bodmin Moor. That’s more central and it covers a lot of ground. A pilot who knows his job should have no great difficulty in getting his wheels on the ground, provided he chooses the right place. In the off season for holiday traffic he might even land on the main road, the A30, which runs right across it, mostly dead straight, for what must be the best part of ten miles or more.’

Biggles frowned. ‘Bodmin Moor,’ he said softly, slowly. ‘That name rings a bell with me. Where have I heard it lately?’

Ginger answered. ‘You’re probably thinking of the police constable who was found there, murdered — let’s see, it would be about a fortnight ago. The constable was found dead on the road. He was a man named Harley, one of the regulars who did night duty.’

‘Ah! That’s it. I remember now. I’ve heard no more about it.’

‘No doubt because no arrest has been made. There has been nothing more about it in the papers.’

‘Queer that this should crop up just when we were interested in the place. Can you recall the details, as far as they’re known?’

‘I think so. Some tourist on his way to the coast via Bodmin saw a bicycle lying beside the road. He stopped and had a look round, but seeing nobody he went on. A couple of hundred yards farther on his headlights picked up a body lying on the road. It was a policeman. He was dead. All he could do was move the body to the side of the road and press on to Bodmin, where he reported what he had seen to the police. They brought the body in. There were several injuries, one on the head. Naturally, at first it was assumed that the constable had been knocked down by a hit-and-run motorist—’

‘In that case, surely, the bicycle would have been near the body?’ interposed Biggles.

‘The answer was found at the post-mortem, when it was discovered that the officer had been shot in the back by a forty-five revolver bullet. That, of course, made it a case of murder. That’s the last I’ve heard of it.’

‘Now why should anyone murder a policeman at a spot like that?’ murmured Biggles pensively.

‘He may have stopped a suspicious-looking character to question him,’ contributed Algy.

‘I suppose that could be the answer, but it doesn’t impress me,’ returned Biggles. ‘In the first place, why should a suspicious-looking character be walking the road in the middle of the night? Why walk? One would think he’d try to thumb a lift. Again, why was the body so far from the bicycle? Why

didn't this supposed suspicious character get on it and ride away?'

'You tell me,' Algy answered. 'What are you thinking?'

'I'm wondering if by any chance this murder could have any connection with our problem. Why was the body so far away from the bicycle? That strikes me as very odd. If you asked me to explain it I'd say the officer wasn't with his bike when he was murdered.'

'All right. What do you think happened?'

'If you're asking for a theory, without any evidence to support it, I'll give you one. The constable was cycling down the road when he saw something unusual. He stopped, and leaving his bike beside the road went forward on foot to investigate. In doing that he took on more than he bargained for. That's the risk policemen take these days. He was trying to get back to his bike when he was shot in the back.'

'But his body was found *on* the road, nowhere near the bike,' argued Algy.

'That's because it was put there. The murderer didn't know the policeman had a bike. He had to get rid of the body so he dumped it on the road, anywhere, hoping it would be assumed that the officer had been knocked down by a car. As in fact it was, at first.'

'But why did the murderer have to go to all that trouble?'

'Because he knew policemen don't vanish into thin air. When this one failed to return from his beat a search would have been made for him. The man who did the shooting didn't want that to happen.'

'He could have put the body where it wasn't likely to be found,' suggested Bertie.

'That doesn't change my argument. It was better to have the body found, or, as I say, there would have been a full-scale search, which was something the murderer didn't want.'

'I can see some weak spots in your theory, old boy,' came back Bertie.

'Such as what?'

'The wounds. If the constable was shot dead there would have been no need to knock him about.'

'That's where you're wrong. You'd expect a man knocked down by a car to have injuries — serious injuries if they were enough to kill him. And it's no use arguing that the wounds were caused before the shooting because if the constable was on the ground it wouldn't be easy to shoot him in the back. Why shoot him in the back, anyway? If the shot was fired to make sure he was dead it might as well have been into his chest, in the heart, or head. No. When that wretched police officer was shot he was trying to get away. His back was towards the gunman. And he had not then been injured or he wouldn't have been able to run away. In a word, he was shot first and injured afterwards. Does that make sense?'

There was silence for a moment. Then Bertie said. 'I know that road pretty well. The moor is open, but there'd be no difficulty in disposing of a body where it would never be found.'

‘Such as where, for instance?’

‘Down one of the old mine shafts scattered about all over the place. Hundreds of ‘em. A local lad once told; me there were over two thousand of ‘em.’

‘Are you talking about coal mines?’

‘No. Metals. Cornwall used to be a great place for metals — copper, lead, zinc, but mostly tin. The place is fairly dotted with ruins at what used to be the pitheads. Sometimes the old shafts have been fenced, but not always, so if you’re thinking of doing a hike be careful where you’re putting your feet. Every so often someone falls into one of these holes. It’s a dangerous place for kids to play, I can tell you.’

‘I find that interesting,’ said Biggles slowly. ‘I imagine these holes would make it dangerous for a plane to get down.’

‘Not if you knew your ground. Of course, the herbage is pretty rough — heather, gorse, and that sort of thing.’

‘Hm. I have a feeling it wouldn’t be a bad idea to cast an eye over Bodmin Moor.’

Said Ginger: ‘Does that mean you’re going to take up the case of the murdered constable?’

‘It does not. The local police would take a dim view of Scotland Yard poking its nose in without being invited.’

‘Then why bother?’

‘There’s a chance that the man we’re after, this fly-by-night intruder, may be using the moor for whatever it is he’s doing. If we follow his tracks, those we know have always run in that direction, and as the moor must be a lonely place it seems the sort of spot he’d be likely to choose. We’ve got to start somewhere and this strikes me as good an area as any. What I’d really like to know is the exact spots where this unfortunate constable and his bike were found. If there *is* any connection between this and the man we’re looking for, it should narrow the area to be watched.’

‘You’ll only get that information by going to Cornwall.’

‘I realize that. Just a minute. Let me think.’ Biggles paused, toying with his pencil. He took a cigarette and lit it. ‘What I’d like,’ he went on, ‘is a mosaic of this moor on both sides of the road. We could extend the picture later if necessary. I’ll tell you what. We can all take a hand in this. Algy, you and Ginger can get the photographs. Take an Auster with a vertical camera and be on the job first thing tomorrow morning — that is, of course, if the weather is right. Visibility will dictate your altitude but around two thousand would be best. Have the pictures ready for me when I get back here.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I shall take Bertie and go to Bodmin by road. I’ll have a word with the police there and, if they’ll co-operate, find out exactly where the policeman and his bike were found. At the same time I’ll have a good look at the moor from ground level. I don’t think we need bother to find the man who reported

the body to the police. They'll have got a statement from him.'

Biggles got up. 'Okay. Let's get on with it. If we don't soon have something to report the balloon will go up and we shall go up with it. Come on, Bertie. We'll get off right away. We can spend the night in Bodmin to be ready for an early start in the morning. With any luck we should be back here by tomorrow evening.'

CHAPTER 3

BODMIN MOOR

AT ten o'clock the following morning, with a cigarette smouldering between his fingers Biggles sat on a low, heather-covered mound, beside the road that crossed the expanse of desolate ground he had come to see with his own eyes — as the saying is. Bodmin Moor. It was a fair morning, clear, with an occasional bank of high cumulus cloud drifting on the face of a moderate south-west wind across a blue sky.

As a general view the landscape was not inspiring, but it was much as he had expected to find it. One moor is very much like another. On both sides of the pale ribbon of road, without much traffic on it at this hour, an expanse of rough, flat, mostly treeless, uncultivated ground rolled away to a horizon formed by gently rising slopes.

As with similar areas in Britain, there was a wearisome sameness about the scene, with nothing to catch the eye or hold attention. The heather, tough old 'stick' heather, as it is called in Scotland, was not yet in flower. Only here and there a growth of gorse made a splash of gold. For the rest, one or two ruins such as Bertie had described, roofless walls with perhaps the stump of a crumbling chimney stack, were the only objects, dismal enough in themselves, to break the melancholy picture. High in the air larks were trilling, but apart from these there was no sign of life; no animal, not even a humble rabbit that had survived the killing disease, myxomatosis.

Things had gone as Biggles had planned. After an easy run down from London in the car he and Bertie had spent the night in Bodmin, Nine o'clock the following morning found them at the police station. Biggles had introduced himself, making the excuse for being there that the affair of the murdered constable might have a bearing on another case on which he was engaged; which was true. He did not say what it was.

The Inspector in charge could not have been more helpful. He said there had been no new development in the case of the policeman. They were still at a loss for a motive, and without one it was hard to think of a theory to account for the murder. When Biggles had asked for the scene of the crime to be marked on his map, he was offered the services of a policeman to show him the actual spot where the body was found; which was even better, particularly as the officer detailed to go with them was one of the party that had gone out to bring in the body. He knew exactly where it had lain.

'I don't think you'll find much there,' were the Inspector's last words. 'We've been over the ground thoroughly.'

Biggles answered that he was more concerned with the spot where the murder had been committed than with finding the weapon that had been used.

'The whole thing's a mystery,' concluded the Inspector, shaking his head.

‘Why anyone should want to kill poor Harley beats me. He was a quiet, inoffensive sort of chap; rarely had any trouble with anybody except on one or two occasions with a poacher.’

‘And poachers don’t usually carry revolvers,’ returned Biggles, as he left the office.

With the policeman beside him, Police Constable Redruth, Biggles drove towards the scene of the murder. His guide appeared to be a taciturn sort of man. Not until they arrived did he speak, and then it was with a rich Cornish brogue.

‘We’re coming to the place now,’ he said. Then, ‘This is it.’ He got out and pointed to a spot on the verge. ‘Just here. This is where Mr Brunner put the body. He found it lying in the road. He moved it so it wasn’t run over by another car. They travel fast on this stretch.’

‘I suppose Mr Brunner made a statement?’

‘Yes. He’s a Mr Peter Brunner; comes from Coventry. He was on his way to St Mawes for his holidays. He says he looked around but couldn’t see anybody. It was a dark night.’

‘What time was this?’

‘Just after two o’clock in the morning.’

‘And where was the bicycle?’

Again the policeman pointed. ‘Along there. Same side of the road, lying in the heather. About two hundred yards from here as near as makes no difference.’

‘Was it damaged at all?’

‘Not a mark on it as far as I could see. Just as if poor Harley had put it down to look at something.’

‘By the way, was Mr Brunner alone in his car?’

‘Yes. Good thing too. It wouldn’t have been a nice experience for a woman if he’d had one with him.’

Biggles looked across the Moor. ‘I believe these ruins I can see are all that are left of old mine workings. Are they ever worked now?’

‘Never in my time. They’re just the same as when I first set eyes on ‘em as a boy.’

‘What’s that long dark-coloured mark I can see over there?’

‘Been a fire at some time, I reckon. Picnickers and hikers are always setting the heather alight. We don’t bother much. Can’t do much harm here unless the smoke’s blowing across the road to interfere with the traffic.’

‘Quite so. Well, I think that’s all. Thanks for coming along. Mr Lissie can run you back to the station now, I’ll wait for him here and we’ll get back to London.’ Turning to Bertie Biggles went on: ‘Take the officer back to the station. Collect our things at the hotel and settle the bill. I’ll stay here. There’s no need for me to come with you. Pick me up and we’ll push along home. We’ll have lunch somewhere on the road.’

‘Right you are.’ Bertie got into the driving seat and the car departed the

way it had come.

Biggles, alone, found a little heather-covered hump and sat down to smoke a cigarette and survey the landscape pending Bertie's return. The delay, he thought, would at the same time provide an opportunity to do some hard thinking while on the actual scene of the tragedy. Not that he knew much more than when he had set but for Cornwall. He decided not to bother to search the ground in the immediate vicinity because this, according to the Inspector, had already been done by the police. They had found nothing, and he was confident they would have done the job thoroughly.

As he sat there, with an occasional car passing in one direction or the other, a familiar sound overhead made him glance up. He saw what he expected. An Auster. So Algy and Ginger had arrived. Forthwith they began their task of flying up and down. Always at the same altitude, taking in a different stretch of the ground on every run.

With the sound of the engine constantly in his ears, knowing what the plane was doing. Biggles took little interest in it. His eyes wandered over the landscape, not seeking anything in particular but on the off-chance of noticing something, such as a detail out of place, on which to concentrate his attention. He saw nothing to excite him, but because the dark patch of ground was one of the few conspicuous marks in an otherwise monotonous panorama, his eyes more than once wandered back to it. The police constable had said he thought it must be where there had once been a heath fire, caused by careless trippers lighting a fire for a picnic tea. As this is a common occurrence all over the country it seemed a reasonable assumption.

But why there? pondered Biggles. When the driver of a car on a long-distance run stopped to boil a kettle it was usually by the roadside, close to the car. Why did someone walk what Biggles estimated to be at least a quarter of a mile to light a fire? It seemed unlikely that anyone in a car would do that. Of course, he reasoned, it might have been caused by a party of hikers out for a tramp across the moor. No doubt that was a common occurrence. But this fire could not have been caused by a cigarette end tossed carelessly from a car window — a common cause for such fires.

Thus meditated Biggles, moodily contemplating the lonely moor, with the Auster drowning the song of the skylarks as it worked at its photographic routine. He was still sitting in the same place when the car returned.

Bertie stopped and got out. 'I see the boys are on the job,' he said cheerfully.

'Yes. They came some time ago and must be nearly finished.'

'Anything doing, old boy?' Bertie joined Biggles on his hump.

'Not a thing, as far as I can see.'

'What do you make of it?'

'Not much. If we're right in thinking it's somewhere in this locality that our unknown night bird is laying its eggs, the pilot's taking a chance every time he comes over; that's if he actually lands and supposing the ground

coverage of the moor is the same everywhere as it is here. Look at it. This old tough heather is long enough to trip up a light plane and put it on its nose. I wouldn't care to try putting an Auster down on it.'

'It may not all be like this.'

'True enough. How do we find out? We'd have to walk a good many miles to check the entire moor and that would take time. Algy's photos should show any obstructions, rocks and that sort of thing, but I doubt if they'll have a clear enough definition to reveal the height of the herbage.'

'Pity there aren't any grouse here.'

'What have grouse got to do with it?'

'Well, if this was a grouse moor it would be worth while burning the heather off in strips, as they do in Scotland, to produce new young shoots for the birdies to eat. This old stuff is all right for them to nest in, but no grouse-bird, unless it was dying of hunger, would try to make a meal of it.'

'Talking of burning, it looks as if there has been a fire over there.' Biggles pointed. 'That's what the constable thought. He put it down to careless hikers.'

'Probably right. Maybe not. In dry weather a moor can set itself on fire by spontaneous combustion. The sun shining through a piece of glass, a broken bottle for instance, can do it.'

'So I believe.'

'If a fire did start here I doubt if anyone would bother to put it out. It couldn't do much harm.'

'In that case what does put it out?'

'Rain, sooner or later. Have you been across to look at that burnt patch?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'What could it tell us? There's been a fire. We know that already. It would mean a fair walk and we haven't time to mess about for no serious reason,' At this point of the conversation, Algy, or whoever flying the Auster, apparently having spotted the stationary car on the road and two men sitting near it, came over low. Biggles waved. The plane rocked its wings as a signal of recognition and went on its way, heading east.

'So they've finished and are going home,' observed Biggles. 'I think we might do the same. We've a fair run in front of us. It might be as well to have a look at their pictures before we start tramping the moor. They should be ready by the time we get back.' Biggles got to his feet. 'The trouble with this sort of thing is there's always a feeling that you could be wasting your time — looking for something that isn't there. However, we've got to look somewhere and it might as well be here. At least we can tell the Air Commodore that we're trying. I'd like something a bit more substantial to work on before I spend too much time here. At present we're working on not much more than a hunch. If necessary we can always come back.'

'But you still think this may be the objective of the bloke we're looking

for?’

‘I wouldn’t go as far as that. I think it *might* be, because from all the sightings that have been made the plane was heading in this direction. We may be barking up the wrong tree. How are we going to find the right one?’

‘I can only see one way to check if we’re on the wrong track.’

‘How would you do that?’

‘We could sit here and wait for the plane to come over.’

‘That would mean squatting here all night and every night, in all weathers.’

‘I’m afraid so,’ agreed Bertie.

‘If the plane came over at regular intervals, and at one particular hour, the idea might be worth considering. But it doesn’t. It has sometimes been more than a month between the reports, so one might sit here for a month to no purpose. Do you feel like sitting here for maybe a month on the mere off-chance of the plane coming over?’

‘Frankly, old boy, I can’t say the prospect would set me whooping with rapture,’ admitted Bertie,

‘That goes for me, too. Let’s press on home and have a close look at the photos before we talk about doing night shifts in this dreary place. We shall have to be on call at the Yard, anyway, in case there’s another report.’

‘Then there’s nothing else we can do.’

‘There might be one thing while we’re in Cornwall. The thought has just struck me.’

‘What is it?’

‘When we came here we’d decided there might just be a remote possibility that there was a connection between the intruder and the murdered constable. The murder isn’t our business, but there’s one angle, from our point of view, that may have been overlooked by the local police because to them it could have no possible bearing on the case.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘This man who found the body, a traveller from Coventry named Brunner, on his way for a holiday at St Mawes.’

‘What about him?’

‘He said he had a good look round but didn’t see anybody or anything. It was a dark night. But did he *hear* anything? An aircraft, for instance. He might have done. If he did he wouldn’t pay any attention to it. Why should he? He’d be concerned only with the body he’d found. A plane at that moment would mean so little to him that I doubt if he’d even mention it in his statement to the police. He was travelling alone, remember. We might even wonder what he was doing on the road at two o’clock in the morning.’

Bertie stared. ‘You don’t think he could have had anything to do with the murder.’

‘I’m suspicious of everyone until he can prove he’s in the clear. What I’m really thinking of is this. Did he notice a light anywhere? If a plane intended landing on the moor there should have been a signal light showing somewhere

on the ground. That again would have meant nothing to Brunner in the state he must have been in at the time. That's if his statement is true. Come to think of it, we know nothing whatever about this man Brunner. He was alone on the moor on the night of the murder so the police have only his word for what happened. The police don't appear to have questioned it. It might be worth while having a word with him. St Mawes is only a small place, so he wouldn't be hard to find, if he's still there.'

'Does that mean you're thinking of calling on him?'

'Possibly. But we've no time for that now. Let's press on home.'

They got into the car and set off up the long white road.

CHAPTER 4

A MATTER OF DEDUCTION

THE following morning Biggles was in the office early with the photographic air survey covering the top of his desk. It consisted of a number of photographs taken by a vertical camera from the same altitude. Fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle they made a single picture of an area of ground too large to be contained on a single photographic plate. In this case it was Bodmin Moor, or that part of it with which they were concerned. The road on which the constable had lost his life ran like a ribbon across the middle of it.

With a large magnifying glass in his hand he had been studying the result of Algy's work for the best part of half an hour without comment. He went over it slowly, inch by inch and section by section.

At last he spoke. 'I can't see much that's likely to be of any help to us,' he said. He continued. 'There is just one thing though that puzzles me. Algy, or perhaps you, Ginger, must have noticed this long darkish patch, no great distance from what I take to be the ruins of an abandoned mine. What did you make of it?'

Ginger answered. 'Yes, I saw it. One could hardly I miss it. It was the only really conspicuous mark on the heather, which for the most part was pretty well all alike.'

'What do you think it was? What had caused it?'

'I took it to be a place where there had been a runaway heath fire at some time. I can't see what else it could have been.'

Algy agreed.

Biggles nodded. 'That's what the policeman thought, the one who showed us the spot where the murdered constable's body had been found. I didn't question it. But there's something else. On the photograph there's a detail which I couldn't see from where I stood on the road: or maybe the angle from which I was looking had something to do with it. It's plain to see on the photo. I mean this strip of heather that runs parallel with the burnt piece. It seems to be lighter in colour than most of the heather. Did either of you notice that?' Biggles looked up.

Ginger answered. 'Yes, I had a good look at it.'

'What do you make it out to be?'

'Frankly, I didn't pay any serious attention to it. There was nothing on it. It shows up because the green is lighter, brighter. It was the only place like it as far as I could see; but as I say I didn't give it any serious thought because working the camera I had to watch what I was doing.'

'I noticed it, but I was more concerned with keeping a straight line,' put in Algy. 'I fancy the ground there dipped a bit so it might have been a brighter green as a result of water draining in from the higher ground.'

‘Yes, I suppose that could account for it,’ murmured Biggles.

Bertie stepped forward. ‘Mind if I have a dekko, old boy?’ He took over the magnifying glass. ‘I’ve never been on this particular moor, but I’ve walked on a good many grouse moors in Scotland so I know a bit about this sort of country, if you see what I mean. I imagine all moors that grow heather are very much alike.’

‘Carry on. See what you can make of it. There must be a reason for the heather being a different colour and we can’t afford to gloss over anything, however trivial it may seem.’

For perhaps a minute Bertie studied the photograph intently. Then he said: ‘Shall I tell you what I think this is, what happened here?’

‘That’s what I’m waiting to hear.’

‘Before fire burnt off that patch of heather where it’s plain enough to see, there was another fire close to it. Must have been some time ago. In case you don’t know, when a fire runs through heather it burns off all the stuff that’s above ground but it doesn’t kill the roots unless the peat underneath it is very dry, when it may go deep and smoulder for months unless there comes a lot of rain. I fancy what we can see here, this light patch, is young heather shooting up from roots where old woody stuff was at some time or other burnt off.’

‘That’s interesting,’ Biggles said. ‘If you’re right, it can only mean there must have been two fires in practically the same place.’

‘That’s what it looks like to me, old lad.’

‘Hm. That strikes me as a bit odd. Say, a coincidence.’

‘I suppose one could say that, considering how far the fires were from the road. Of course, there may be something in that particular area likely to cause a fire. If a railway crossed the moor, for instance, sparks from the engine would cause fires when the heather was dry.’

‘There’s isn’t a railway, so let’s not waste time talking about something that isn’t there. What else could have done it?’

Bertie, polishing his monocle with a handkerchief, shook his head. ‘I haven’t a clue, old boy, not a bally notion — unless some silly blighter chucked cigarette ends about.’

‘In that case one would expect fires all over the place. Two in the same place looks more to me as if it was done deliberately.’

Nobody spoke.

After a pause Biggles continued. ‘It would be reasonable to suppose that what caused the first fire also caused the second. If it wasn’t an accident, and we can’t see anything to suggest it might have been, then the thing must have been deliberate. It follows that if someone set the heather on fire he must have had a reason. You’ll notice that both fires were roughly the same size, long and narrow. That can only mean that both fires started when the wind was in the same direction.’

‘They run south-west to north-east or vice versa,’ put in Algy.

‘Say south-west to north-east. South-west is the direction of the prevailing

wind. Both strips are long and narrow. Does that suggest anything to anybody?’

Ginger answered. ‘A long strip would be handy for an aircraft wanting to land.’

‘Good. That’s what I was thinking. If I wanted to make a landing strip on the moor that’s the shape I’d make it, and the direction, to suit the wind one’s most likely to find in this particular part of the country. It might be worth while checking the direction of the wind when the intruder came over. The Met. people would know. I don’t say that would prove anything, but it would support the view that a plane could land there — the pilot, of course, having the advantage of knowing he was landing into the wind as he touched down on the strip. In fact, he wouldn’t be able to land in any other direction without running into long heather which might tangle with his undercarriage and trip him up. Just a minute. Let me think.’ Biggles paused, chin in hands, elbows on the desk. Presently he went on. ‘Here, if Bertie is right, we have two strips. They run parallel. One has been there for some time. The other is apparently new. Bertie, you seem to be an expert on these matters; tell me this. When old heather is burnt off how long does it take for the roots to sprout again?’

‘It would probably show green the following year.’

‘You mean, short stuff.’

‘Yes. Very short. Naturally, after that it would get longer every year. Being young, and fresh, and green, it wouldn’t be as easy to burn as the old stuff.’

‘So in order always to have a clear strip it would be necessary to burn off the old, rank, heather from time to time to keep a safe strip going.’

‘Yes. As I say, it would be easier to burn the old stuff than the new growth. But hold hard, old boy. Aren’t you forgetting something?’

‘What?’

‘This intruder chappie, as far as we know, is a night bird. In the dark he wouldn’t be able to see the strips.’

‘He would if a light was put out at each end of the runway to mark it. That raises a point. Could these lights have been what the murdered constable saw that caused him to get off his bike to investigate?’

Algy answered. ‘That’s possible. But surely if there had been a plane up to some crooked business the lights would be fixed to point directly upwards so that only the pilot could see them?’

‘One would think so,’ conceded Biggles. ‘But don’t forget the constable was on the road, which is on somewhat higher ground. He might have seen the glow, particularly in the absence of any other lights on the moor. He might have heard the plane, even if it was only gliding in.’

‘Hold on a tick,’ broke in Ginger, who had been scrutinizing the photograph through the magnifying glass. ‘I’ll tell you something else that gives weight to the theory that these burnt areas might be landing strips. You’ll notice there are quite a few obstructions on the moor; the remains of old mine workings and what might be outcrops of rock. Admittedly they’re

widely scattered, but you'll notice that there aren't any on the runways. Why? Is that a coincidence — or is it?

Biggles grabbed the magnifying glass. 'By Jingo, laddie, you're right!' he exclaimed. 'Good work. I hadn't noticed that. Either those strips, if that's what they are, must have been sited to avoid any obstructions, or any obstructions that may have been there were moved.' Biggles put down the glass. 'Unless we've run into more than one coincidence, which is always possible, we may have got a line on something here. Well, we've covered the ground pretty thoroughly and I don't think there's any more we can do with these photographs. I have a feeling it's time we had another look at Bodmin Moor.'

'How?' inquired Algy. 'How are we going to find out if we're on the track or merely building up a theory to suit us? Would you like me to slip along in the Auster and try an actual landing on one of these strips?'

'Not on your sweet life,' replied Biggles vehemently. 'That's the last way I'd go about putting the theory to the test.'

'Why?'

'Use your head, chum. If it so happened that we're thinking on the right lines, an aircraft landing on that particular spot could hardly fail to warn the people there that someone is wise to what's been going on.'

'You think there *is* somebody there?'

'Surely there must be if these are landing strips. At least one man would have to be on the spot to take care of things. I can imagine several things that might upset an aircraft. Sheep wandering about, for instance. Apart from mobile obstructions, bearing in mind we're dealing with a night-flyer, someone would have to put out at least two landing lights to mark the limit of the runway. The pilot couldn't do anything about that himself. I can't imagine him using parachute flares. They might set the heather on fire. Apart from that, there's always a certain amount of traffic on the road and it wouldn't be long before someone would want to know what was going on. If this mystery plane we're after is using the moor, he arrives after dark and leaves before dawn, when no one is about; that is, when there are no car headlights on the road.'

'So what are we going to do?' asked Ginger.

'Go down again by road to Cornwall and have a closer look at these strips by taking a stroll across the moor. That shouldn't arouse suspicion if we were watched. It must happen sometimes. There's no need for us all to go. Two should be enough, one to keep his eyes on the ground and the other to take note of anyone else about in the vicinity. Someone will have to be on duty here, anyway, in case the radar boys come through to say the intruder is over.'

'When are you going to start on this jaunt?'

Biggles looked at the clock. 'I might as well start today to be ready for work in the morning. It's a long run and one needs a rest before starting on anything else. I shall take Bertie with me, as he seems to be the expert on

moors and what happens on them. We'll put on some old togs and carry haversacks to look like a couple of stray hikers.'

Algy put a question. 'How long are you likely to be away?'

'I can't say. That will depend on what we find — if we find anything. Having got the information we want about these strips, there'd be no reason why we shouldn't come straight back home.'

'You wouldn't stay there?'

'I wouldn't think so; not at this stage of the proceedings. I could always ring up if we were likely to be delayed. I'll let you know where we're staying in Bodmin. Should the intruder come over you can call us and let us know.'

Algy went on. 'There's one thing about this that doesn't line up with you being a couple of hikers. I imagine you won't walk all the way from Bodmin to the moor. It's a long way.'

'Of course not.'

'You'll take the car?'

'Yes.'

'If you stop it beside the road anywhere near these strips, and then get out and start hoofing it across the heather it would knock on the head your pose of being ramblers.'

Biggles nodded. 'You make a point there.'

'Moreover, a stationary car on the road and nobody with it might start the local police making inquiries. You might even return to the car to find it had been towed away.'

Biggles considered the problem. 'Perhaps it would be as well if someone else came with us,' he decided. 'Having dropped us off he could carry on and return to pick us up later. After all, one should be enough here to take care of things for the short time I reckon to be away. Ginger, you'd better come. I'm afraid, Algy, that means you'll have to stand by the phone here.'

'Okay. It'll suit me to rest my feet instead of blistering 'em route-marching through miles of dusty heather.'

Biggles rose, picking up the photograph. 'All right. Let's leave it like that. Ginger, you might bring the car round. We'll slip home to get our kit and have a bite of lunch on the way to Cornwall.'

An hour later the police car was on the road.

Six hours later it was being parked in the garage of the hotel where Biggles and Bertie had already stayed the night.

They had travelled slowly over Bodmin Moor, which, of course, using the main road, the A30, they had had to cross on the way to their destination. Once, for a few minutes, without getting out of the car, they stopped to survey the landscape and reconsider the general picture. With one minor difference it was exactly the same as when they had last seen it; and there was nothing unnatural about the difference. Beyond the burnt strip a man with a dog, apparently a shepherd, was minding a small flock of sheep.

'I can guess what he's doing,' Bertie said.

‘Tell us.’

‘He’s giving his sheep a feed of that new heather. Sheep, like the grouse-bird, are fond of heather when it’s short and sweet and tender and juicy.’

‘That’s a pity,’ returned Biggles. ‘If sheep have been trampling the stuff down we’re not likely to find much. I suppose the old stuff may have been burnt off for no other reason than to feed sheep.’

‘Quite likely.’

‘In that case it looks as if we’re wasting our time.’ Biggles drove on.

At the hotel, as they got out of the car Ginger said, ‘Shall we need the car again tonight?’

Biggles answered. ‘No. Not unless Algy rings up to say he’s had a signal that the intruder is over, in which case we’d go back to the moor and keep our eyes and ears open. You might call Algy to let him know we’ve arrived. Confirm he has our phone number here.’

‘Right away.’ Ginger went off.

CHAPTER 5

FIRST INSPECTION

THE next morning, after an undisturbed night. Biggles and his party were early at work. With sandwiches for the day in their haversacks, and Biggles with binoculars slung over his shoulder, they set off for the objective.

A little distance short of it, before reaching the higher ground. Ginger, who was at the wheel, at a word from Biggles brought the car to a stop. Biggles and Bertie got out quickly. The car went on, to get, and remain, out of sight. This meant going something like two miles, because the road was straight and open to the winds of heaven, that is to say, without any concealing trees or hedges, except an occasional clump of broom or gorse on one side or the other. This manoeuvre, of course, had been arranged before the start.

Ginger's orders were to wait an hour before returning, Then he was to cruise back without stopping unless signalled to do so. This procedure was to be repeated until the others returned from their on-the-spot reconnaissance, which was not expected to take more than two hours at most.

This was merely a simple precaution against attracting the attention of anyone who might be watching the area with which they were concerned. There were other cars on the road, most of them travelling at high speed and without stopping, there being no reason to do so except in the case of a breakdown. Later in the day a car might stop for a picnic lunch by the roadside, but that was not likely to happen at this early hour.

When Biggles and Bertie were ready to leave, seeing the car coming they would "thumb" a lift, which would account for the car stopping. All this was on the off-chance of a watcher keeping an eye on the road for anything unusual. It might be that they were being over-cautious, as Biggles stated when the arrangement was being made; but he held the view that the visits of the intruder, should this be its objective, must have been organized by a man who would take every possible precaution against his plan going wrong. He convinced that if the moor was being used as secret landing ground there would have to be at one man on the ground to carry out part of the operation.

With the car disappearing in the distance Biggles and Bertie walked a little way along the road to higher ground, actually close to the spot where the constable been murdered, as this gave a wider view of the moor. Here they sat, backs to the road, to make a preliminary survey of the ground in front of them before walking across it. There was no apparent change in the landscape except that the shepherd and his sheep were no longer there; or, at all events, they were not in view.

'Apparently sheep don't graze here all the time,' remarked Biggles. 'I suppose they're only driven from time to time for a free feed.'

'You know, old boy, I found myself thinking about that last night after I'd

gone to bed,' Bertie pensively.

'You mean the sheep? What was there to think about?'

'It struck me there was something a bit odd about it. Only a detail, I must admit.'

'What's odd about sheep on a moor? On most moors you will usually find sheep.'

'I'm not thinking about the bally sheep. It was the dog that somehow seemed wrong.'

'Where you see a shepherd you will always see a dog. And there are a devil of a lot of dogs in the country, of one sort or another.'

'True enough. But a lot of them are specially bred and trained for one particular job. The sheep dog is one of them. He comes from a specialized strain. He inherits from his mum the knowledge of what he's expected to do. That makes him easy to train. I mean to say, a foxhound is bred to hunt foxes and nothing else. If he went after a rabbit he'd be ticked off. Pointers and setters are trained to point game, although some do it by instinct. The job of a bloodhound is man hunting — that sort of thing — if you see what I mean.'

Biggles looked at Bertie curiously. 'Well? What about it?'

'The sheep dog we saw on the moor yesterday wasn't like any sheep dog I've ever seen. Nowadays they're mostly a sort of collie.'

'What breed was the one we saw here yesterday?'

'I don't know. It was too far away. But I can tell you this. It was no ordinary sheep dog.'

'I imagine any dog can be taught to look after sheep.'

'Probably. But why should a farmer in this part of the world use anything but the right sort? It's his business. The wrong sort of animal might do more harm than good, chasing the wretched sheep from hell to breakfast.'

'What did this particular dog look like to you? Make a guess.'

'Well, if you're asking me to guess, the dog we saw yesterday reminded me of a German breed of guard dog. I forget its name.'

'You don't mean an Alsatian?'

'No. Nothing like it. The dog we saw was brown — a kind of chestnut colour. The type I'm thinking of is more like a small, lightly built mastiff. I once knew a feller who had one, but it bit so many people he had to get rid of it. Most sheep dogs are friendly.'

'Hm,' murmured Biggles. 'This is interesting. We'll keep it in mind,' he smiled. 'This is where you can teach me a thing or two.'

'It's my line of country, old boy.'

'That's what I thought. That's why I brought you along. Try to spot something else. Now we'd better start walking.'

Bertie gave the moor a final comprehensive scrutiny through the glasses, 'Not a soul about,' he announced. 'We have the place to ourselves.'

'Provided the ground is level.'

'What is that supposed to mean? You can see the ground is level.'

‘I agree that’s how it looks from here, but in open country one can never be sure. A fold in the ground, even a slight depression, can hide a crowd as long as they all keep their heads down. I’ve seen it happen. Even so, that needn’t concern us. We’ve as much right on the moor as anyone. Let’s press on.’

They moved off at a steady pace towards the objective, which was, of course, the burnt heather suspected of being a strip on which a light plane could land. This was no more than a suspicion. The present excursion was to ascertain, if possible, if the ground being used for that purpose.

It was a fair day, sunny, with only a light breeze although some threatening-looking clouds rolling from the south-west suggested these conditions might not last.

‘I have a feeling we should have brought our macs,’ remarked Bertie. ‘This is no place to be caught in a storm.’

Still without seeing any signs of life, except a soaring buzzard high overhead, they reached the blackened area without encountering such a depression as Biggles had thought might occur. They stopped to examine the ground at their feet.

‘What do you make of it?’ Biggles asked the question.

‘Not much, old boy. But I can tell you this. The heather here was burnt when it was bone dry. Note that the fire has burnt to ground level; sticks and everything. On a grouse moor they’d say this was good burning.’

‘Then heather doesn’t always burn like this?’

‘No fear. On a stiff breeze, if the ground is wet, a fire can sweep through taking off only the tops. They flare up like tissue paper. I get the impression that this fire was started deliberately when the heather was in perfect condition for the job.’

‘Anything else?’

‘No. That’s all.’

‘Then let’s walk the length of it. The bare ground, having been exposed to wind and sun, has dried out pretty hard, but it might still show wheel marks.’

Moving a few yards apart to cover more ground they walked the length of the strip, stopping where the long heather started, no great distance from what apparently were the ruins of an abandoned mine. They found no wheel tracks, or anything else of interest.

‘No luck,’ Bertie said.

‘If there were tracks they could have been brushed out by someone who didn’t want them seen,’ mused Biggles. ‘Or sheep could have trampled them out. Sheep have been on here. Let’s try the young stuff. We may have better luck there.’

They moved on the adjacent strip. It was about the same width and ran parallel. The ground had a covering of bright green fresh young heather from six to nine inches high.

‘This wouldn’t be too bad for landing on,’ observed Biggles.

‘Not at the moment,’ agreed Bertie. ‘But given the right sort of weather

from now on it will grow pretty fast, and soon be long enough to make landing risky.'

'This patch was once burnt off?'

'Definitely.'

'And this new growth. How long would it take reach this stage?'

Bertie looked doubtful. 'It's hard to say. That would depend on the weather and the nature of the ground. Only a man who knew the moor could answer that. I can only say this. Whether this strip was burnt to graze sheep, or make a landing strip, it'll soon be too long for either. Perhaps the chap who burnt the first strip wants to have another patch ready.'

'I take your point. That's what it looks like. I'm no expert on heather but I can see you could be right. Tell me this. If a plane landed here surely it would crush the heather and show marks?'

'It might crush the heather but it wouldn't stay crushed. Heather is tough and springy. It doesn't break off. It bends, and it doesn't take long to get on its feet again. Any marks would soon disappear. Look behind you and you'll see what I mean. Sheep have been on here, as you can see where the stuff has been nibbled, but they haven't left any tracks. We're walking in it, but we're not leaving any marks either. You can see the stuff straightening itself again behind us.'

Biggles stood with both feet together and put his weight on them. Then he stepped aside. The heather sprang erect, showing practically no mark. 'I see what you mean,' he said. 'I'm glad I had someone with me who knows something about heather or I'd have missed that point. Good work.'

Bertie grinned. 'Don't mention it, old boy. Glad I can be useful sometimes — if you see what I mean. One man can't be expected to know everything about everything, so to speak. It so happens that I used to do quite a bit of grouse shooting in Scotland, and where you have grouse you have heather. The birds live on it. Pretty poor sort of diet, you might think, but they seem to do all right on it. That's where I learned to shoot. I mean to say, if you can pull down an old cock grouse whistling over at seventy miles an hour, jinking as he goes, you should be able to hit a thing the size of an aircraft.' Looking past Biggles' shoulder Bertie went on quickly with a change of tone: 'Don't look now, but here comes the shepherd, complete with dog, taking his baa-lambs for a stroll.'

Biggles' expression changed. He frowned. 'Where the devil could he have come from?'

'Search me, chaps. He must have popped up behind us, maybe from one of those depressions you were talking about. Same dog, I think. If that's a sheep dog I'm a bally Eskimo. I don't care much for the look of it. I don't think it likes us.'

On the pretext of turning his back to the breeze to light a cigarette Biggles looked round. Coming slowly in their direction a powerfully built man was bringing up the rear of a small flock of about a dozen sheep. Little could be

seen of his face for it was almost covered by an old cloth cap above, pulled down over his ears. He wore a macintosh, with the collar turned up, gumboots, and carried a shepherd's crook. The sheep grazed as walked. The dog took no notice of them. From manner it was more interested in the men. With its head held low, and the hair on its neck bristling, it was advancing towards them with a slow but purposeful step.

'See what I mean?' Bertie said softly. 'When a trained sheep dog is doing a job it takes no notice of anything else.'

As the dog came nearer it showed its teeth.

Biggles shouted to the man: 'Call your dog off. It looks dangerous.'

At a word of command from its master the dog, with backward glances, sullenly retreated.

'What do we do?' Bertie asked.

'I don't see that we need do anything,' Biggles glanced at the sky, from which a few spots of rain were falling. 'We look like getting wet. No matter. I'd like to know where this fellow suddenly appeared from. I can only think it must have been from behind those ruins. We have a look when he's moved on a bit. If we're going have a shower, and I fancy we are, we might find shelter there.' Again Biggles looked round the sky as if they were discussing the weather.

The shepherd was still moving on slowly, apparently taking no notice of them.

'Let's make for the ruins,' Biggles said.

They started walking towards them casually, but the rain quickened they increased their pace to quicker step and finally a trot. As Biggles remarked, this, in the circumstances, was natural; not that they needed an excuse for what they were doing.

They reached the old mine, for clearly that was what was, to find the sprawling brickwork covered more ground than they had expected. As the lower part of the crumbling walls were still standing they had to walk round them to find a way in, to get to the only shelter the place offered. This was a long low shed in the last stages of dilapidation, but at one end of it, for a matter of a few yards, some slates remained on what had been the roof. The only other conspicuous objects were the stump of a chimney stack, built of stone slabs, and a skeleton wooden structure which may have carried the winding gear over the pit.

Hurrying on, they came to what appeared to be the only gap in the walls. It had been half closed by two hurdles.

'This must be where the old man came from,' said Biggles as they went in. 'Yes, this is it. He must spend some time here, judging from the quantity of sheep droppings.'

They walked across a trampled area of heather and tufts of coarse grass between heaps of fallen weed-covered brickwork to the end of the shed, the only place that promised shelter from the rain, which by now had increased to

a sharp downpour. Under the remaining piece of roof some of the old bricks had been roughly arranged to form a seat; or that's what it looked like, since there was no other apparent reason for it.

'This must be where the shepherd sits to watch his sheep before he lets them out,' surmised Biggles, seating himself. 'I imagine he closes the exit with those hurdles.' He looked around. 'What's that wire arrangement over there?' He pointed to a length of galvanized wire netting, about five feet high, stretched on posts. It was under what apparently, from some rusting ironwork, been the winding gear when the mine was working.

'Looks like a fence round the old shaft to prevent anyone from falling in,' conjectured Bertie. 'Or sheep, if it comes to that. I'll have a look.'

He walked over, and after a quick glance returned. 'Yes, that's it,' he announced. 'I believe all these old pits are by law supposed to be fenced, but not all of them are. I wonder they didn't clear all this junk away. They've even left some of the old wire rope hanging down the shaft, to encourage any kids coming this way to play games and break their necks. Confound this rain. Why didn't we have the sense to bring macs? We look like getting our shirts wet.'

'We didn't bring macs because when we started it didn't look as if we should need them,' Biggles pointed out. 'The shepherd must have seen what was coming and put his on. Can you see what he's doing? We don't want any trouble with that vicious-looking hound of his.'

Bertie stood on a mound of bricks and looked over the wall. 'He's coming this way. Bringing the sheep here, I suppose.'

'How far away is he?'

'About a hundred yards.'

'I have a hunch he's coming to see what we're doing. Keep an eye on him.'

Biggles got up and strode quickly to the old shaft. He considered it for a minute then walked closer to the remains of the pithead gear. He reached out and touched something, then walked back to Bertie.

Hardly had he resumed his seat, and before he could say anything, sheep were pouring in through the gateway, followed by the shepherd and his dog. The man pulled the hurdles together. The dog stopped, bristling, when it saw the two men already there.

Biggles got up. 'I'm afraid I've taken your seat,' he called cheerfully. 'We came in to shelter from the rain.'

'You can sit,' the man replied gruffly, and then stood leaning on his crook.

Bertie, standing in the open, held out his hands palms upward. 'The rain's about finished. No more than a drizzle now. The sun's blinking through already.'

'In that case we might as well get back to the road before another storm blows up,' Biggles said, vacating his seat.

They walked out of the place, the dog snarling at them as they passed.

'Which way?' asked Bertie, replacing the hurdle he had moved to enable

them to get out.

‘Like I said, back to the road,’ answered Biggles. As they strode on through the wet heather Biggles added, ‘I think we’ve learned enough here, as much as we shall learn today, anyway.’

‘Well, what do you make of it?’ inquired Bertie, as they made for the nearest point of the road. ‘I still think there’s something fishy about that nasty-tempered dog.’

‘The dog isn’t the only fishy thing there,’ returned Biggles dryly.

Bertie looked at him sharply. ‘Ah! You spotted something.’

‘Too true. Fasten your safety belt because this going to shake you.’ Biggles held out his right hand, was black.

Bertie stared. ‘What the deuce is that?’

‘Oil, laddie, oil. O — I — L. Don’t stop. Keep walking. And don’t look back.’

CHAPTER 6

SINISTER DEVELOPMENTS

FOR a moment Bertie said nothing. He whistled softly. Then he muttered, 'I say, old boy, that's a bit of a boneshaker. Where was it?'

'On the gears of that winding tackle. That mine is still being used. You don't grease gear wheels that are never likely to be used again.'

'Our shepherd pal must know all about it.'

'Of course he knows. He knows plenty. I'd make a bet he knows who shot Constable Harley. I'd also bet he's watching us at this moment. That's why he's there. There's no other practical reason.'

'The sheep are a blind, eh?'

'That's how it looks to me. And I'll tell you something else. He isn't alone.'

'Why do you think that?'

'Because one man alone couldn't lower himself into the mine. It would need at least two men, one to work the winding gear while the other goes down.'

'Stiffen the crows!' breathed Bertie. 'This certainly is a corker.'

'We haven't wasted our time.'

'Have you any idea of what the mine is being for?'

'Not the remotest. How could I have? But it's obviously being used for something crooked; something worth while, too, judging from the trouble that has been taken to get the place organized. Don't talk for a minute. I want to think about this while it's fresh in my mind.'

Nothing more was said until they reached the road. Cars and other vehicles were passing in both directions but their own was not among them. 'We may have to wait a bit so we might as well sit down,' Biggles said, sinking into the heathery verge. He lit a cigarette before he went on. 'We've done a good morning's work, and for the moment I'm content with that.'

'What's our next move?'

'Frankly, I don't know. It'll need some serious thought. The thing bristles with difficulties. Naturally, I'd like to have a closer look at those ruins, but I don't see how we can go back there in daylight. That fellow watching the place can't suspect what we're doing — not yet. But if he sees us there again, unless he's slow on the uptake — and I wouldn't care to gamble on that — it would be a different matter. What excuse have we got for going there? If you can think of a plausible reason I'd be glad to hear it.'

Bertie polished his eyeglass. 'Sorry, but that's got me beat.'

Biggles resumed. 'It seems to me we're in some danger of getting two cases tangled up. The intruder and the murdered constable. It may well be that there's a connection between them; but until we get evidence to support that,

we'd better stick to what brought us here in the first place. This damned intruder aircraft. The first question we have to ask ourselves, before we do any more scouting on the spot, is this. Assuming that shepherd is a guard, a sort of watch dog, does he live on the job, in the ruins or possibly down the mine, or does he knock off and go home somewhere? That's important.'

'There doesn't seem much point in him being there all the time,' offered Bertie. 'He'll be there when he's wanted.'

'Another question. Does this old mine belong to somebody who is actually still working it? No doubt the police could tell us that, or find out; but if we go to them we may start something. I'd rather work on my own unless it becomes impossible. I could go on asking questions for some time, but I see Ginger coming so they can wait till we get back to the hotel.' Biggles stood up.

For the benefit of the shepherd, who may have been watching, they made a business of thumbing a lift. The car slowed. Stopped. They got in. Ginger drove on. 'Any luck?' he inquired.

'Not too bad. We might have done worse,' answered Biggles, who was sitting next to him. 'Pull into the side of the road and stop at the next dip. I've a little job for you.'

Ginger obeyed.

Biggles went on. 'You know we came here to have a look at what we thought might be a landing strip. We've done that. I haven't time now to tell you what happened, but not far beyond the end of the burnt heather; there's a pile of ruins. A disused mine — or that's what it looks like. Something's going on there. We don't know what. I hope to find out. When we left the place a few minutes ago there was a man there with a dog and some sheep. What I want you to do is stay here and watch if the man leaves. If he does, note where he goes. Lie in the heather so you can't be seen. Careful of the dog if he comes near you. Here, you'll need the binoculars. Don't let the sun flash on the lenses. I'll leave you my haversack. You may do with the sandwiches. There's no need for us all to stay here. It would mean leaving a stationary car on the road. I'll dash into Bodmin with Bertie for some lunch and come back to relieve you in, say, a couple of hours. Okay?'

'I get it.' Ginger got out, taking the binoculars and the haversack.

Biggles slipped into the driving seat and Bertie got in beside him. 'See you shortly,' he said, and drove on.

'In case you're wondering why I'm doing this,' he went on presently to Bertie, 'I have a feeling that phoney shepherd is a key man in whatever is going on here, so the first thing to find out is where he goes when he leaves here. He knows us by sight, so we don't want to be seen hanging about here. He'd wonder what we were doing. Ginger doesn't matter.'

'Absolutely,' agreed Bertie. 'I'm with you.'

'The devil of it is we can't go back to those old workings — anyway, not in daylight — without the shepherd getting suspicious. We might do some scouting after dark but that would be a tricky business. What we really want

to know is, does that fellow live on his job or does he go somewhere to eat and sleep? If he stays where we saw him then obviously he must have some means of subsistence. That's why I've left Ginger there to watch.' Biggles, who was driving only at cruising speed, waved on a car trying to overtake.

'If he's living there it could only be down the mine or we'd have seen more than we did.'

'That might be the answer.'

'If he's anything to do with our intruder he'd certainly have to be on the spot when the plane is expected.'

'Not necessarily. His job might be merely to check on anyone prowling about the place — as he did on us this morning. He wasn't long giving us the once-over; at least, I can think of no other reason for his behaviour. It's reasonable to suppose he'd be about when the plane was expected. But that introduces another factor. He would have to know when the plane was due. How does he know? I don't see how there could be a regular timetable because operations would be subject to weather conditions. Someone, somewhere, must have contact with the pilot of that plane. It would be no use him coming over if the moor was under fog, and that's a common occurrence here.'

'I see no reason why the shepherd, or someone else at the mine, shouldn't be in touch with the plane by radio,' Bertie said.

'I was thinking on those lines. But where's the equipment? I didn't notice an aerial. But I wouldn't expect to. If one was seen by a person wandering on the moor it would look a bit out of place and perhaps start inquiries.'

'An aerial needn't be left out all day,' Bertie pointed out. 'Nobody would see it at night, the time it would be needed. It could be inside what's left of that old chimney stack.'

'Yes,' agreed Biggles. 'You may have something there.' He grinned. 'Jolly good. This seems to be one of your really bright days. Full marks. I feel we ought to have a closer look at that chimney stack. But how? When? It would have to be at night. Carry on. You're doing fine. Tell me something else.'

Bertie smiled. 'Thanks, old boy. There must be something in the atmosphere here that gets the old grey matter ticking. Sorry, but I'm afraid that's the lot for the moment. I'll let you know if another brainwave hits me.'

Arriving at the hotel they parked the car, went in, and still discussing the case had lunch. They then went back to the car and returned to where they had left Ginger. They couldn't see him, but a whistle brought him up from some deep heather in which he had been lying.

'Well, have you seen anything?' questioned Biggles.

'Not a thing. If a man was in those ruins when you left them he must still be there,' declared Ginger. 'No one has come out since I've been here.'

Biggles looked surprised. 'Great grief! He must get bored with sitting there hour after hour with only a bunch of sheep for company.' With a change of voice he went on sharply: 'Wait a minute. Have you been asleep?'

Ginger blinked. 'What do you mean — have I been to sleep?'

'What I say. Lying in the sun you didn't by any chance find yourself dozing?'

'I most certainly did not,' declared Ginger indignantly. 'Why ask such a question?'

'Because if I can't see the man out on the moor, going somewhere, there must be something wrong with my eyes.'

'Where?'

'Close on half a mile from the ruins, making for the road.'

'All I can say is, he didn't come out of those ruins,' asserted Ginger trenchantly.

'Give me those glasses.'

Ginger handed them over.

Biggles focused them on the distant figure. 'Yes, that's our man all right,' he stated, looking at Ginger suspiciously.

'Don't look at me like that,' protested Ginger. 'I'm telling you the truth. I don't know where he's suddenly popped up from but I'd take my oath he didn't come out of those ruins.'

'Where else could he have come from?'

'Easy on the oars, chaps,' put in Bertie. 'I may have the answer to that one. I remember reading in a book, a long time ago, that these early miners made a point of having an emergency exit, a spare hole to get out of, so to speak, in case the bally roof caved in, as in those days it sometimes did. The spare hole also created a draught to let in some fresh air to the poor blighters sweating away with their picks and shovels down below. That sort of thing, if you see what I'm getting at. There may be more than one way of getting in and out of this mine we've got our eyes on.'

'I suppose that could be the answer,' conceded Biggles, thoughtfully. 'The possibility didn't occur to me.'

'If that's the man you saw it's the *only* answer, because he didn't come out of the ruins you told me to watch,' insisted Ginger vehemently.

'Okay — okay. I'll take your word for it. But if there is a spare hole, as Bertie calls it, where is it? Work that one out.'

'You work it out yourself,' challenged Ginger. 'You can see everything I can see.'

By this time the man they had been watching had passed out of sight behind some rising ground not far short of the road.

'Are you sure it's the same man?' said Ginger.

'Almost certain; but I must admit he was some distance off. We can soon settle that. He must be nearly to the road by now. Bertie, nip along in the car and have a look at him. Try not to let him see your face. We'll wait here.'

Bertie drove off at high speed. He was away only a few minutes. He returned in a skidding stop and jumped out. 'No use,' he announced. 'He isn't there.'

‘Isn’t there?’

‘Not a sign of him. All I could see was a car in the distance going the other way.’

‘So that’s it,’ muttered Biggles. ‘Someone must have been waiting and picked him up. That’s a pity. We missed a chance.’

‘Always supposing he *was* the man we’re watching,’ Ginger said. ‘What about the dog? He hadn’t got one with him.’

‘No. Now you mention it, he hadn’t.’ Even Biggles began to look doubtful. ‘There’s only one way to settle this,’ he decided. ‘If that wasn’t our man then he must still be at the ruins. Bertie, run Ginger into Bodmin for some lunch. I’ll keep watch here. If nobody has come out of the ruins by the time you get back Ginger can walk across and have a look inside. Our smart shepherd has never seen him so it won’t matter if they bump into each other.’

This being agreed, Bertie departed, taking Ginger with him.

Biggles made himself comfortable in the heather and with his back to the road settled down to watch the landscape in front of him, paying particular attention, of course, to the ruin. He lit a cigarette and reflected on the unusual problem he had set out to solve. The facts, such as they were, were meagre, but there was plenty of room for conjecture. There were, he saw, two problems involved, the murdered constable and the intruding aircraft. Did they overlap? It was a possibility that could not be ruled out, although the one did nothing to help the other. Indeed, they were likely to cause confusion unless they were considered separately.

Time passed. Nothing happened. To the frequent passers-by nothing could have looked more quiet and peaceful, or innocent, than the open moor.

The sun was well down when the car returned.

‘Anything doing?’ inquired Bertie as he jumped out.

‘Not a thing,’ Biggles went on, somewhat gloomily: ‘I’m beginning to wonder if we aren’t trying to build up a little flimsy evidence to fit what we came here to find. If that shepherd has really gone we may be wasting our time. If he’s still in the ruins what can he be doing all this time? It’s time we settled the thing one way or the other. Ginger, do you feel like a walk?’

‘Suits me.’

‘Fine. Then stroll across and see if there’s anyone in those ruins. Don’t go direct. Make a detour as if you’re not making for anywhere in particular. Carry on past the burnt heather and have a look inside the old mine workings as you pass them. Watch out for the dog. As far as we know it’s still there. It’s a bad-tempered brute, although I shouldn’t say that, if it’s only doing what it’s been trained to do.’

‘Is this really necessary?’ Bertie asked.

‘Well, I see it like this,’ returned Biggles. ‘If we’re thinking on the right lines, if the shepherd isn’t there it’s unlikely our intruder friend will be over tonight. If he is there, then the plane may come.’

‘I see what you mean,’ said Bertie.

‘Shan’t be long,’ put in Ginger. ‘If I don’t get a move on it’ll be dark before I get back.’ He departed on his errand.

Biggles and Bertie could see him until he reached the burnt strip and turned in the direction of the old mine. After that, what with the failing light, and a tenuous mist that was beginning to form now the sun had gone, they lost sight of him. They could only wait.

When nearly an hour had passed and Ginger had not returned Biggles said, perhaps a little irritably: ‘What can he be doing? He should be back by now. I’m getting worried. I shouldn’t have let him go alone. Anything could happen out there in the dark.’

‘Maybe he’s found something,’ suggested Bertie, optimistically.

‘If he has, I only hope it isn’t more than we bargained for,’ returned Biggles grimly.

Bertie got up. ‘I’d better put on the sidelights or move the car off the road. We don’t want anyone bumping into us. This mist, now it’s nearly dark, could make driving a bit tricky.’ Turning towards the car he stopped, rigid. ‘What’s that?’

The question was not really necessary.

From somewhere out on the moor, distant but clear in the silence, came the sound of a dog barking furiously. Biggles sprang to his feet. ‘We can guess what that means,’ he said crisply. ‘We’d better get out there if he isn’t back here in the next few minutes. Let’s get the car off the road for a start.’ Moving quickly he joined Bertie, who was already at the car.

Before they could get in they were dazzled by the headlights of an oncoming car travelling in the direction of Bodmin. There was a scraping of brakes. It stopped. A man got out and came over.

‘Having trouble? Can I help?’ he offered, in a quiet, cultured voice.

Looking at the speaker Biggles saw a tall, well-dressed, clean-shaven man regarding them with a sympathetic smile.

‘No, we’re all right now, thanks all the same,’ he answered. ‘We were just moving off.’

‘I’m going on to Bodmin and thought if you were in serious trouble you might like me to call at a garage and ask them to send someone out to you.’

‘That’s most kind of you, but we’re all right now so that won’t be necessary.’

‘As you wish.’ The man got back into his car and drove on.

Biggles stepped into the road and watched it go.

‘Nice feller,’ remarked Bertie. ‘Not everyone would have bothered to stop.’

Biggles did not answer. Frowning, he returned to the car.

Bertie looked at him curiously. ‘I said he was a nice feller. Wouldn’t you say so?’

‘I wouldn’t say anything.’

Bertie looked surprised. ‘Why not? Dash it all, he couldn’t have done more

than he did.'

'I agree with you there. All I know is, he had a damn good look at us.'

'What about it? Why shouldn't he? He was talking to us. People don't usually stand with their backs to you.'

'Yes. You might have thought he was smiling at us, too; but in case you didn't notice it I can tell you the smile didn't get farther than his lips. There was a look in his eyes that told a different story — to me, at any rate.'

'Oh, I say old boy, come off it,' protested Bertie. 'You must have reached the stage of imagining things. You couldn't say there was anything suspicious about him.'

'You could be right; but at the moment I'm suspicious of anyone on this road, day or night. I have an increasing feeling that there's more going on here than meets the eye.'

'Just what are you thinking?'

'First, why did he stop? Drivers don't usually stop at a stationary car beside the road unless signalled to do so. If they pulled up at every car they wouldn't get anywhere. As things are today everyone is in a hurry to get to where he's going. It struck me that that car might be the one that collected our wandering shepherd. I say collected because I feel sure it was no casual pick-up. The shepherd must have known the car would be there. Remember, it didn't come from the direction of Bodmin or we'd have seen it go past us here. It came from the opposite direction, picked up the man, turned and went back.'

'So what?'

'It's my guess the shepherd reported seeing us on the moor — at the old mine, in fact — whereupon someone came along to have a look at us. Don't forget we've been on and off this road most of the day. I suspect someone is wondering why.'

'Any reason for thinking that?'

'Yes. I noticed the gent who offered to help us had a long hard look at our number plate. Why should he be interested in our registration? I returned the compliment by making a note of his. That's why I stepped into the road when he went on towards Bodmin. Another thing. I'm pretty sure I've seen that man's face before; but was a long time ago and his name eludes me. I remember it presently, and in what connection.'

'Do you mean he was a crook?' asked Bertie.

'I don't know; but if he was, well, you see what I'm getting at. But never mind about that now. Ginger isn't back, so it's time we were doing something about it. He may be in trouble. I only hope that dog hasn't savaged him. We needn't move the car. We'll leave the sidelights on. That should be okay. When it gets really dark we may need them ourselves to mark the position of the car.'

They set off at a brisk pace across the moor, heading for the spot where they judged the old mine to be. In the failing light it could no longer be seen.

They had covered some distance when Bertie laid a hand on Biggles' arm and brought him to a halt. 'Did you see that?' he ejaculated.

'See what?'

'I thought I saw a light flash ahead of us. In fact I'm sure I did. It seemed to reflect on something.'

Biggles stared into the gloom. 'Ginger hadn't got a torch.'

'That's what I was thinking.'

'There's no light there now.'

'No. But unless it was a will-o'-the-wisp there was one.'

'Listen.'

From somewhere in front the sound of voices came eerily through the clammy mist.

'Come on,' snapped Biggles.

They went on as fast as the rough ground and thick heather would allow.

CHAPTER 7

TREED

GINGER set off on his solo assignment with the greatest confidence. Nothing could have appeared more simple, and whatever happened he could not see himself in any physical danger. He did not forget the dog, should it still be there; but he regarded this more as a possible nuisance than a threat.

He should have learned that over-confidence can be as disastrous as under-confidence, and it is likely that he took his mission too casually. His only anxiety was, should he be delayed until after dark, with the mist thickening he might have difficulty in finding his way back to the car, even though the lights were on.

He came to the burnt area, and without loitering, knowing that Biggles had already examined it, turned towards his real objective — the old mine workings. There did not seem any particular need for caution, for, after all, this was England and, as far as he knew, common ground, so the question of trespass did not arise.

Reaching the broken-down walls he did pause for a moment or two to listen; but he heard nothing. A strong unmistakable smell of sheep told him the animals were still there; or had been until very recently. Satisfied that all was well, moving quietly he made his way along to the hurdles that barred the entrance, or the exit, as the case might be. They were closed. He stopped. He looked. The only sign of life was a huddle of sheep staring at him. The light was now dim, so what with this and the weed-covered heaps of rubble he found it difficult to see the far side of the enclosure as clearly as he would have wished. He waited for a minute, peering and listening, but there was neither sight nor sound of a human being. Evidently the shepherd was not there. That was really all he wanted to know. Thinking it important that there should be no mistake about this, with a hand resting on the hurdles he whistled softly. When this did not produce any result he said, in a voice loud enough to be heard by anybody present: 'Anyone there?' There was no reply.

This really answered his question. Nothing more was necessary. The shepherd had gone. This did not surprise him. If, as Biggles had thought, the man had left the place, his absence was to be expected. Still, he was not entirely satisfied. It would be as well to make sure. There was just a possibility that the man, should he still be there, had gone to sleep in the only building, or part of a building, left standing. This of course was the shed where Biggles and Bertie had sheltered from the rain. He could see the silhouette against the sky but he could not see inside it.

Deciding that it would only take a minute to confirm definitely that there was no one there, he pulled the hurdles apart and with every confidence stepped inside.

He had not taken more than three paces when, with a vicious snarl, a dog rushed at him. Where it so suddenly came from he did not know. He did not stop to look. Feeling sure the animal would follow him, and catch him, should he retire the way he had come — for the hurdles would obviously be no obstacle to the dog — he sped to the only place of safety in sight. This was the skeleton wooden structure that had once supported the winding gear over the pit. He scrambled up to the first crossbar, one that braced the whole thing, beyond the reach of the dog, and sitting astride it looked down at the creature below. It had squatted on its haunches and was glaring up at him with an expression of calculated hatred.

Ginger could have kicked himself, as the saying is, for putting himself in such a ridiculous position. He had not forgotten Biggles' warning about the dog, but not seeing it had naturally assumed it was not there. Safe for the moment, from his perch he considered the situation. At first he could not see how he could do anything about it. He had no weapon of any sort, not even a stick, and he was not so stupid as to suppose he could take on a big dog with his bare hands without injury. To be bitten, in such a remote place, could be a serious matter. It was hard to see how he could escape this if he tried to get away. The dog was no mere terrier. It was more the size and weight of a hound.

He tried talking to it in a coaxing voice, hoping to soothe it; but he soon gave that up, perceiving it was, futile. The animal bristled in a frenzy of rage.

Looking hard at it Ginger saw, for the first time, that it wore a collar. To this was attached a rope, a tethering line. Following this with his eyes he made it out to be tied to a short post driven into the ground not far away. This explained what up to now had been something of a mystery. Why the dog had not caught him. It had been given enough rope only to cover the entrance; that is, the hurdles. This, he supposed, would be all that was necessary to prevent the sheep from leaving their pen should anyone open the hurdles and leave them open. Just as effectively it would, of course, prevent him from leaving the place by the way he had entered.

He would soon have to do something, he told himself desperately, for deep twilight had closed in and Biggles would be wondering what he was doing. He had already been away longer than had been anticipated.

Thinking the matter over he decided that if he could get down out of reach of the dog it should be possible to find a place where he could get over the surrounding wall and so make his escape. This he resolved to attempt. To be on the safe side it meant moving along the crossbar and descending to the ground by means of the leg at the far corner to which it was joined.

Straddling the crossbar he worked his way across it foot by foot to the far side of the structure, or rig, or derrick, or whatever it might have been called. He took it slowly and carefully, for a fall could have serious consequences. However, all went according to plan and he reached his first objective, the far leg, without any great difficulty. Well satisfied, for the way of escape now

seemed open, he took a short rest. Then, clutching the heavy square timber post like a monkey on a stick he started down. This, too, had to be taken carefully, for there was a risk of getting splinters in his hands.

He had nearly reached the ground when something he had not foreseen occurred. The dog, apparently having more than ordinary intelligence, must have realized what was happening. Straining on the rope at its fullest extent, barking furiously, it gave a tremendous lunge. The rope broke and it was free.

Ginger went up his post faster than he had come down; and he did not stop until he reached the crossbar. There, still breathing heavily from shock and consternation, he rested, the dog below, and the sheep in a tightly packed mob watching the performance with their customary foolish expressions — or lack of expression.

It was now a case of as-you-were.

Ginger resigned himself to wait for rescue. Sooner or later, when he did not return. Biggles or Bertie, or probably both, would come to look for him. He might have to wait a long time. He was worried about what would happen when, with the dog loose, they arrived on the scene. There seemed a good chance of one of them being bitten before they realized the danger. To make matters more difficult it was now almost dark; and it looked like being a dark night.

It would not do to print the names he was calling himself for having, with the best intentions, brought about such an infuriating situation. In some circumstances it might have had a humorous aspect; but, it need hardly be said, he saw nothing funny in it. There was no excuse. He had made a blunder.

The cause of the trouble had stopped its frenzied barking and now sat staring up at him. He stared back. There was nothing else he could do. The dog was not likely to move: and he couldn't move.

He nearly fell off his perch when a voice spoke; and it was not the voice of either Biggles or Bertie. It was deep and harsh. It said: 'Where are you? Come out.'

Ginger could just discern a shadowy figure advancing in the dim light. It appeared to limp and moved with the aid of a stick. As Ginger had been looking at the dog he had no idea of the actual spot from which the man had so suddenly appeared.

'I'm up here!' he said.

'What are you doing?' came back in a peremptory voice.

Ginger bridled at the question. 'What the devil do you think I'm doing, looking for birds' nests?' he answered curtly. 'I'd have thought you could see what I'm doing.'

'Come down!'

'Not on your life,' returned Ginger grimly. 'If that dog belongs to you, get it under control. It flew at me. It's a dangerous brute.'

'You had no right to be here.'

‘No right!’ Ginger nearly choked. ‘This is a National Park’ (actually he was not sure of this) ‘and I have as much right to be here as you have. You’ve no right to bring that beast to a public place.’

The man had come closer. He must have had a torch for suddenly Ginger was half blinded by a bright light turned on him. He shielded his eyes with his hands, but with the light on his face he could not see the man behind it.

‘Come down,’ the voice ordered again.

‘Not me. Tie up that dog. It broke its rope to get at me. If I’d been bitten you’d have heard about it.’

The light was switched off and in the gloom Ginger could see the man joining the broken ends of the rope. It was evident the animal knew him, for it made no protest. Indeed, at a word of command it slunk away and sat down.

Ginger returned to earth.

The man came right up to him. ‘Now, young man, what are you doing here?’

Ginger liked the tone of voice still less. ‘What the hell’s it got to do with you?’ he rapped out. ‘You talk as if you owned the place. If it comes to that, what are you doing here, anyway?’

‘Answer me!’

‘You can go to the devil,’ snapped Ginger. ‘Instead of giving me orders you owe me an apology for bringing a mad dog here and causing me a lot of inconvenience. Get out of my way.’

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘If you must know, back to the road.’

The man did not move.

‘What’s the big idea?’ demanded Ginger indignantly, although, as a matter of fact, he was aware of a mounting feeling of alarm. ‘My friends are waiting for me,’ he added, to let the man know he was not alone.

‘Unless you answer my questions I’ll let my dog loose.’

Ginger stared. ‘You’ll do what?’

‘You heard me.’

Ginger could feel a loose brick under his feet. He snatched it up. ‘You take one step towards that hound and I’ll knock your block off,’ he threatened viciously.

What the outcome of the affair would have been had there not been an interruption, is a matter for speculation; but at this juncture a voice spoke. To Ginger’s great relief it was Biggles. He said: ‘What’s going on here?’ To Ginger he added: ‘What are you playing at? We can’t wait all night.’ Bertie was with him. They moved in through the hurdle entrance. The dog growled but did not move.

Ginger answered. ‘I was cornered by a hound that must have had a wolf for its mother. Apparently this fellow owns it. Instead of apologizing he’s talking as if it was my own fault for coming here.’

‘Well, come on,’ Biggles said shortly. ‘If you must fiddle about looking for

a sprig of white heather you'd better choose some other time. White heather wouldn't have been much use had a dog got its teeth into your leg. Let's go.' He turned away.

Leaving the man standing there they left the enclosure and strode on in the direction of the road. Not until they had gone some way did Biggles speak. 'What happened?' he asked quietly.

Ginger told him. 'Phew! Was I glad to hear your voice! That fellow was getting nasty. Was he the shepherd?'

'No. This chap had a beard.'

'I noticed that. I could swear there was nobody there when I arrived. I looked for the dog but couldn't see it. Goodness knows where it came from. It hadn't made a sound. It was tied up, but when it flew at me the rope broke and all I could do was shin up that derrick affair like a blinking squirrel. Then the man appeared.'

'I told you to be careful of that dog.'

'I *was* careful. But how was I to know the brute would come at me like a lunatic tiger?'

'That's no sheep dog,' put in Bertie.

Nothing more was said till they reached the road and were in the car. Ginger asked where they were going.

'Back to Bodmin,' answered Biggles.

'Are we coming back here?'

'I don't know, I haven't made up my mind yet. It needs thinking about. We're up against something. We're looking for an intruding aircraft that comes only at night. I doubt if we shall ever find it in the air. If we did, what could we do about it? Shoot it down? No, that wouldn't do. Our only chance is to catch it on the ground. That means finding its landing strip. It may be here, within a mile of us. On the other hand we may be on the wrong track altogether, although there's certainly something fishy going on here. One thing we can't do is keep dashing to and fro between London and Bodmin. It takes too long and we should wear ourselves to a frazzle. I shan't go back to London tonight. When we get to the hotel we'll ring Algy and tell him we're spending the night here. He'll have to stand by the phone. If he gets a report of an unidentified machine coming over he can call us. That means we shall have to stand by the phone, too. Or one of us, We'll arrange that. I don't expect anything to happen tonight, but there seems to be a certain amount of activity at the mine, so it could happen. But I rather think that if a landing had been arranged it would be cancelled.'

'Why do you think that?' asked Bertie.

'Well, look what's happened today. First, two strangers are seen on the suspected airstrip. They also go to the old mine. Later, when it's practically dark, someone else goes to the mine. For what reason would anyone go there at that hour? On the spur of the moment, to provide an excuse, I hinted that Ginger was looking for some lucky white heather; but I doubt if the man there

would be taken in by that. Whatever these people may be, they can't be fools. Don't forget our car has spent some time on the road today, and someone may have wondered what it was doing. This, I suspect, is why that considerate gentleman stopped to ask if we needed help.' Biggles told Ginger about the incident as he was not present when it happened. He went on: 'We'll find out who that car belongs to. I've got its number. It was an old Bentley. Registration letters CV, which I believe is Cornwall. The police should know the owner. There can't be many old Bentleys about here.'

'What do we do tonight?' inquired Ginger.

'I had intended walking out to the mine again to have a closer look at it, but after what's happened today it would be risky. We can't go in daylight. If we are seen the people there would wonder what we were up to. That wouldn't make things easier for us. I'll think about it. Let's get back to the hotel. If we got a call that the intruder had been spotted we could always dash out here. That means having the car ready. Bertie, you might see that we're okay for petrol and oil.'

'If you go to the mine don't forget that brute of a dog,' reminded Ginger.

'I'm not likely to forget it. I shall also remember the man who owns it.'

'He's a nasty piece of work, too,' stated Ginger. 'He gave me the impression of being a foreigner.'

'I thought that, too, from what little I heard. But let's press on to the hotel. We can talk there.' They had gone about two miles when they found themselves at the tail end of a queue of cars. Fortunately it was not a long one. 'Must have been an accident,' Bertie said, getting out to see what was happening. He was soon back. 'I guessed wrong. It's a police road block. They're checking all cars.'

Their turn soon came. A police sergeant held up a hand. Two constables, holding torches, closed in. One of them smiled recognition. It was the officer, Redruth, who had shown them where the body of Constable Harley had been found. 'So you're still here,' he remarked.

'Looks like it,' Biggles answered. 'Carry on. It's all yours.' He handed over the key of the boot.

After a perfunctory search the sergeant waved them on. 'All right, sir. That's all.'

'What's the trouble?' inquired Biggles. 'Not another murder?'

'No, thank God. A prisoner got away from Dartmoor this morning in the fog. He may have helped himself to a car. We're making sure he doesn't come this way.'

'Who was it?'

'Lewis.'

'Cracker Lewis?'

'That's him. You know him?'

'Only very slightly.' Biggles drove on.

Bertie spoke. 'Cracker Lewis! Isn't he one of the two safe-busters the Yard

picked up after that bank raid in Hampstead? Shot at and wounded a constable. Got ten years if I remember.'

'That's right,' confirmed Biggles. 'I can understand the anxiety not to let him get away. He had a nice haul of about thirty thousand nicker and managed to tuck it away before he was caught. The money's never been found.'

'No wonder Lewis made a break, with that little lot waiting to be collected,' put in Ginger.

Biggles did not answer.

CHAPTER 8

BERTIE BRINGS NEWS

BIGGLES sat alone in the residents' lounge of their hotel in Bodmin trying to put together, and make them fit like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the items they had gathered since their arrival in Cornwall. These he examined one by one in the hope of making a complete picture. He had not succeeded when Ginger came in. He glanced around. 'Bertie not back yet?' he queried.

'Not yet.'

'It's taking him a long time to top up with petrol.'

'He'll be back. Did you speak to Algy?'

'Yes.' Ginger dropped into the seat next to Biggles. 'We had a long natter. I told him we were staying on and put him wise as to what's happened so far.'

'Had he anything to say about it?'

'Not much. He'll mark time on the phone. I gather the Air Commodore is breaking out in a rash over this intruder business, wondering what we're doing and how long it's going to be before we let him have some definite news. The Minister wants to know what country this plane is coming from and who's operating it.'

'Is that all?' said Biggles with biting sarcasm. 'I'm afraid he'll have to sweat it out. I can't make head nor tail of it. I'm beginning to wonder if we're chasing a wild goose. I'm pretty certain something's going on at that old mine, but what it is I haven't a clue. It may have no connection with what we're looking for. In fact, it may be something perfectly legitimate. It's hard to know what to do next. Even if we're on the right track, to go on wandering about the moor near the mine is likely to do more harm than good. If once we're suspected of being what we are, our birds — if they really are the people we're looking for — will take fright and we shan't see them for dust.'

'What beats me is where that fellow came from who started to cut up rough because I wouldn't answer his questions. I don't see how he could have been there when I arrived or he'd have shown himself when I whistled. It must have been the dog barking that brought him along. But from where? He didn't come through the hurdles or I'd have seen him. He suddenly appeared from nowhere. Could he have come up from the mine? The oil you found on the windlass suggests its being used.'

Biggles shrugged. 'It's possible. How are we going to confirm that there's something going on underground without knowing the depth of the shaft or what's at the bottom? Would you like to go down?'

'I wouldn't mind if you were up top.'

'Stout fella! I'll bear it in mind,' chaffed Biggles. 'I may take you up on that.'

'What's wrong with calling in the police and making a thorough search of

the place?’

‘And a nice pack of fools we’d look if there was nothing there. We’d be the laughing stock of the county. For some reason, I don’t know why, people love to take the mickey out of Scotland Yard. All I can say is this, we’ve soon got to get some definite information or we shall have to pack up and go home. I can’t see the Air Commodore letting us fiddle about here indefinitely running up an expense account. He’ll suspect we’re scrounging a holiday at the Government’s expense.’

‘Rot,’ rejoined Ginger tartly. ‘Not after what you’ve done in the past.’

‘It’s time you realized the past has nothing to do with it. It’s the present that counts. While things go well, you’re the blue-eyed boy. When they go wrong, there’s mud in your eye. What have we found out since we came here? Some burnt heather that might be used as an air strip. A shepherd who minds his sheep with a dog that isn’t an ordinary sheep dog. That doesn’t amount to much. You go along after dark and a man asks you questions. So what? He may be the owner of the property or he may hold the grazing rights.’

‘What about the man on the road who stopped his car to ask if you needed help?’

‘That may be unusual but it isn’t particularly remarkable. There are such men, although with everyone in a hurry to get somewhere they’re getting few and far between. The only thing about that is, as I said earlier, I have a feeling that I’ve seen that face before. Perhaps not in the flesh. It may have been a photograph. I may be wrong. It was a long time ago, anyway. Well, that about sums up the position as it is at the moment. What else can we do? We shall have to do something or pack it in. Of course, we could sit on that miserable moor and wait for a plane to land on the strip. We might wait for weeks. If we’re wrong it would never come. That’s no use. Frankly, I don’t know what to do. We can’t go near the mine again without a plausible excuse; and it would be daft to cruise up and down the road in the car and expect no one to notice it.’

Bertie came in and joined them.

‘You’ve been a devil of a long time,’ accused Biggles. ‘Is something wrong with the car?’

‘No. The car’s all right. Don’t get steamed up, old boy. It happens I’ve been busy, all on my own. I struck lucky and picked up some news, although you may not think too much of it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it knocks on the head your idea that the chappie who stopped his car to ask if we needed help might have something to do with what’s going on on the moor.’

‘Come on. Let’s have it,’ requested Biggles.

‘When I went to the garage to fill up, there in front of me was that old Bentley.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive, old boy. CV registration, and all that. And as if that wasn’t enough, there was the man himself paying the pump attendant. He didn’t see me. I hung back till he’d gone and watched which way he went.’

‘Which way did he go?’

‘He took the road that crosses the moor. But hold your horses. I haven’t finished yet. When I went back to the pump to top up I asked the chap in charge if he knew the gent in the Bentley. He did. He knew all about him. Known him for years. Regular customer. His people used to be some of the biggest landowners in Cornwall — tin mines and what have you. His name’s Sir Humphrey Trethallan. He lives at Hallstone Towers, the old baronial mansion near Hallstone, which I gather is a district rather than a village, a little beyond the northern extremity of the moor.’ Bertie broke off, looking hard at the expression on Biggles’ face. ‘What is it? Have I done something wrong?’ he asked anxiously.

Biggles recovered himself. ‘No. Oh no,’ he said quickly. ‘Far from it. You’ve given my memory the jolt it needed to make the penny drop. It was the name that did it. I thought I vaguely knew the face. It must have been a picture in a newspaper. There was a time, some years ago, when Sir Humphrey’s face looked at you from the front pages of the national papers.’

‘Matter of fact, the name rang a bell with me,’ said Bertie.

‘What did he get up to, to get his name in the papers?’ inquired Ginger.

‘It comes back to me now,’ resumed Biggles. ‘As I remember it, the case, which raised a first-class stink, was this. Sir Humphrey Trethallan was a well-known playboy in high society. He could afford to be. His father left him a fortune, and he set about going through it faster than his old man had made it. He gambled in a big way, owning a string of racehorses among other things. The parties he threw in London, Paris and Monte Carlo were the talk of the town. All this blew up with a loud bang when he was accused of cheating at cards in one of the swish London clubs. He brought an action against his accuser — Lord somebody or other. He had to, or admit guilt. He hadn’t a hope. Other people had seen what was going on. He lost the case and was ruined. There was no criminal charge, but as far as society was concerned he was finished. He had to resign from his clubs and the public appointments he held. All he could do after that was fade away. There was a report that he’d gone to Australia. I was doing charter work at the time, that was before I went to the Yard, so my memory is a bit hazy. Well — well. So he’s still alive, rusticated in the ancestral home. In what sort of conditions, I wonder?’

‘The pump attendant seemed to think he was the tops,’ Bertie said. ‘A good tipper, and so on.’

‘He would be. That sort of man usually is. Of course, it’s easy if you’re using somebody else’s money,’ Biggles ended cynically.

‘So that’s another clue that’s fizzled out,’ sighed Ginger.

For some seconds Biggles did not answer. Then he said: ‘It would be interesting to know why he came to Bodmin tonight. Was it simply to fill up

with petrol?’

‘Why not?’

‘It meant he had to come across the moor. According to Bertie he went straight back the same way. I can’t believe Bodmin is the nearest place where he could get petrol.’

Bertie frowned. ‘Have a heart, old boy. I mean to say, dash it all, he’s a gent. You can’t suspect him of anything crooked.’

‘His social position makes what he did in the past worse than rotten. He cheated his own friends at cards. If that isn’t crooked I don’t know what is. A man who will do a thing like that must have a streak in him that’s as crooked as a ruddy corkscrew. Some men have an excuse for going off the rails, but he hadn’t. Anyway, I’ve already said I’m prepared to have a second look at anyone, tourists apart, who crosses that moor at night without a reason. Merely to fill up with petrol doesn’t strike me as a very convincing reason. If only to satisfy my curiosity I shall make it my business to check that Bodmin is the nearest place where Sir Humphrey can get petrol.’

‘You’re wasting your time,’ declared Bertie. ‘Once a gent always a gent.’

‘And once a crook always a crook,’ returned Biggles evenly. ‘I had an idea of having another look at that moor later tonight, after we’ve had something to eat. We can still do that. At the same time we can go a bit farther and cast an eye over — what’s the name of Sir Humphrey’s place?’

‘Hallstone Towers.’

Ginger stepped in. ‘With what object? What’s the house likely to tell us?’

‘Well, it occurs to me that if the Trethallans made money out of mining, Sir Humphrey may still own land here. He may even be the owner of these abandoned mines, including the one in which we have an interest. It may be a remote chance, but it’s possible he still holds the title deeds. He may have let the land to someone, in which case he should be able to help us.’

‘But if these mines have been worked out they can be of no value to anyone,’ Ginger pointed out.

‘Not as mines, admittedly.’

‘What, then?’

‘It’s no use asking me. That’s what I want to find out. I know of one mine that’s being used for *something*, otherwise only a lunatic would have oiled the wheels of the winding gear.’

‘Are we all going on this jaunt tonight?’ Ginger asked. ‘I was thinking, shouldn’t one of us stay here to keep an ear to the phone in case Algy comes through to say an unidentified aircraft is in the offing?’

Biggles hesitated for a moment. ‘We can take a chance on that,’ he decided. ‘It shouldn’t take us long to do what we have to do. If a plane should come this way we should hear it. I’ll speak to the night porter and ask him to take a message should one come through for us while we’re out. My plan was for all of us to go, drop you off at the usual place on the moor to watch the mine and go on with Bertie to Hallstone Towers. When we’ve had a look at it

we'll pick you up on the way back. Remind me to have a look at the map to see exactly where this place Hallstone is. But that's enough for now. I'm getting hoarse with so much talking. I'm going to oil my tonsils with some steak and kidney pudding. I see it's on the menu.'

'That,' said Bertie, 'is music to my ears. The best suggestion you've made tonight, old boy. Absolutely. I'm flat out for a plate of pud, anywhere, any time.'

They got up and walked through to the dining room.

CHAPTER 9

A SHOCK FOR BIGGLES

IT was ten o'clock when the party left the hotel, Biggles having made no changes in his plan.

Where the weather was concerned the night could be described as fair; moonless but clear; the sky half covered with high cirrus cloud which, as there was no wind to move it, seemed likely to persist. As Biggles observed, it was a good night for flying, although while visibility might have been better, it could have been a lot worse.

'There's plenty of cover behind that cloud layer for an intruder to slink in,' he said, as he took the road to the moor. 'The alternative would be to come in low to get under the radar. That means five hundred feet, or lower. If the pilot tried that we should certainly hear the machine. Not that we have any reason to suppose it will come over tonight. That, with us on the moor, would be too much to hope for. The trouble is, we haven't a clue as to what this raider is doing. If we had we'd be in a better position to judge when he's likely to come.'

'That, surely, would be governed by weather conditions,' put in Bertie.

'No doubt. But even so, his goings and comings would almost certainly depend on something that has happened on the ground, not necessarily here, but somewhere in the country. Obviously these raids are being made with a definite purpose, otherwise they wouldn't happen. It's no use trying to guess what that purpose is. We've got to find out — don't ask me how — or we could spend the rest of our lives here without getting anywhere. We're still groping in the dark, literally, but if we stick around, with any luck we should spot something that will make sense of the whole business.'

The car, running on sidelights only, made its first stop, as arranged, at its usual place on the moor. The police road block had been lifted, so the road was clear. Ginger got out.

'I reckon we should be back in about half-an-hour,' Biggles told him. 'Stay here. Watch for lights. If any appear at the mine, or anywhere else on the moor, you're bound to see them. Don't try any more exploring on your own.'

'I shan't, don't worry,' returned Ginger warmly. 'I'm not likely to forget that brute of a dog.'

'Okay. This is where we'll pick you up.' Biggles drove on.

Although the map had been studied it took longer to find the house they were looking for than had been anticipated. They found the district without much trouble, but it consisted only of a few widely scattered cottages dotted about a tangle of lanes with banks and hedges on either side. Moreover, there were trees to restrict the view. There was no actual village, practically no traffic on this lonely fringe of the moor, not even a pedestrian to ask the way.

Apparently the men who worked in this truly rural countryside went to bed early.

After several false trails, and stops to consult the map, Biggles brought the car to a halt in a lane which ran up a steep hill. From it branched off a tree-lined track; but the existence at the entrance of broken stone pillars suggested that the track was, or had been, a drive leading to a house of some size. Biggles got out and looked for a notice board, a name, or some other means of identification; but he failed to find one.

‘I think this must be it,’ he told Bertie, returning to the car. ‘There can hardly be two big estates here. If this drive leads to a house it shouldn’t be far away. I’ll walk along and have a look.’

‘Want me to stay here with the car?’

‘You can’t very well stay here. There isn’t room for another vehicle to pass should one come along. I think you’d better move on a bit to one of those places where the lane has been widened to allow for two-way traffic. You shouldn’t have to go far. Or if you’d rather you can back down to that field gate we passed on the way up.’

‘I’ll go on a bit,’ decided Bertie. ‘I don’t feel like backing two hundred yards or more down this hill with a sharp bend in it.’

‘Please yourself,’ replied Biggles. ‘I shan’t be long. When I come back I’ll walk up the hill till I find you.’

‘Right-ho,’ Bertie slid into the driving seat and went on up the hill.

Biggles walked between the crumbling pillars, and carried on along what may once have been a gravelled drive but was now a mossy track, through tall bracken, with trees and shrubs rising from it. There was not a sound; not a sign of life of any sort, and more than once in the darkness under the trees he had to stop to peer ahead to see what was in front of him. He regretted he had not brought the torch that was kept in the car. He had not expected anything quite like this. However, he carried on, making the best time possible in the circumstances.

It was some minutes before he saw with some relief that he was nearing his destination. A light could be seen through the low-hanging branches of the trees. Going on he saw more clearly what he had been looking for; what he had expected to find. A large mansion house. It was not possible to make out details, because all he could actually see was the silhouette against the sky. There was no proof that this was Hallstone Towers, but a tall castellated structure at each end suggested it might be. The drive ended, widening, at an ornate canopy over the front door. One light only was showing. The one he had seen. It came from a room on the ground floor and was no more than a slit, a few inches wide, as if curtains had been carelessly drawn. It reflected faintly on the metal parts of a car drawn up near the door.

Biggles considered the place. He could see as much as was necessary. Advancing with caution, keeping near to the overgrown evergreen shrubs that bordered the drive, he went close enough to recognize the car. It was the

Bentley. So he had come to the right house. This was Hallstone Towers, and it was at once clear that Sir Humphrey Trethallan's fortunes had not improved with the years. The general impression created was one of melancholy neglect. The drive in front of the house was rutted and overgrown with weeds. What had been a garden was a jungle of briars and nettles. The whole building, what could be seen of it, was well on the way to dilapidation. Part of the guttering had broken loose and was sagging. A broken window had not been repaired.

Biggles was about to turn away, for he had no intention of calling on the owner and he had seen all he needed to see, when someone must have moved across the room with the lighted window. The shadow crossed the slit where the curtains did not meet. Thinking it would be interesting to see who was in the room, and it seemed this could be done without much risk of discovery, he moved closer to the window. Passing the car he put a hand on the bonnet. It was warm. But he already knew that it had been out: to Bodmin. Reaching the window he inched his head forward until he could peep round the frame; or, more correctly, the curtain.

He saw at a glance that the room, a large one in proportion to the house, was not furnished in a style that might have been expected of a place of such size. In fact, there was very little furniture; no carpet, no ornaments, not even a picture on the walls, which were panelled. In a word, it was in keeping with the outside; all of which suggested that the prosperity of Hallstone Towers had reached its lowest point ever.

There were two men in the room, standing one each side of a small table on which stood a bottle, a siphon, two glasses and a sheet of paper. They were in earnest conversation, but it was not possible to hear what was being said. It looked as though something on the paper was the subject under discussion. One of the men was the owner of the establishment; Sir Humphrey Trethallan. That was to be expected, and Biggles recognized him instantly. Only a few hours earlier he had spoken to him on the main road when the Bentley had stopped to offer help.

The other man he did not know. Or for a moment or two he *thought* he did not know. He was well dressed, even smartly, in grey flannel trousers, a sports jacket and a bow tie. There was, however, something vaguely familiar about his face, and while Biggles stared at it, searching his memory for identification, the man moved his head a little so that the single light in the room fell on it from a different angle. With the change came recognition; and shock; a shock that froze Biggles to the stiffness of a statue.

The man was Lewis. 'Cracker' Lewis; the time-serving criminal who had just escaped from Dartmoor.

Biggles was not unaccustomed to surprises, but this one took his breath away. He could hardly believe his eyes, as the saying is. What could such a man be doing there?

He did not try to find the answer. That could wait. Moistening his lips,

which had dried under the shock, he backed away. Once at a safe distance he retreated hurriedly down the drive.

He had not reached the junction with the lane when he heard a car start up behind him. It could only be the Bentley. Within a minute he saw the flicker of its headlights in the trees as it came down the drive. He flung himself into the bracken beside the track and covered his face except for his eyes. He remained motionless as the car went past. There were two men in it. Those he had seen in the room. Sir Humphrey was driving.

As soon as the car was out of sight he was racing after it, not of course with any hope of catching up with it, but, if possible, to see which way it turned on reaching the lane. In this he failed; when he reached the junction it was out of sight. He ran on up the hill, and had to cover nearly a quarter of a mile before he came to Bertie waiting in their own car. 'Has a car come past here?' he panted, breathless after his dash up the hill.

Bertie, looking startled, sat up abruptly. 'No. Nothing has come past here.'

'Then it must have turned the other way. Get the car turned round. I don't suppose we can overtake it now but we can try.'

'What car is it?'

'The Bentley. Don't talk now. Get cracking. Make for the Bodmin road.' It took a minute or two to turn the car in the narrow lane, to face the direction from which it had come.

'Steady down the hill,' warned Biggles, 'This is no time or place to have a pile-up.'

Nothing more was said until, after one or two halts to check the signposts, the car was on the main highway. The A30. Then, with the open road in front of them and very little traffic Bertie was able to put his foot down. Biggles peered ahead through the windscreen. Two or three cars were overtaken but none was Bentley.

'I'm afraid we've lost it,' muttered Biggles. 'It must have gone the other way.'

'Had you any reason to think it was coming this way?'

'None whatever; but without giving the matter serious thought I assumed it was making for the moor. I hadn't much time to think.'

'What happened?'

'When I got to the house the Bentley was standing at the front door. I was on my way back down the when I heard it start up. Another minute and it went past me. When I got to the junction with the public road it was out of sight, so I'd no means of knowing which way it had turned. I thought it might have gone up the hill, but apparently it didn't. I then thought it might be making for Bodmin Moor, but it seems I was wrong again.'

'It might still be in front of us.'

'Could be. But I thought it might stop when it got the moor. Ginger should be able to tell us if it went past him. All right, Bertie, you can take it easy now. Stop when you come to the place where we left him.'

‘Who was driving the Bentley — Sir Humphrey?’ asked Bertie, taking his foot off the accelerator.

‘Yes,’ answered Biggles grimly. ‘But he wasn’t alone. He had a passenger, and I was more interested in him than in the driver. They were both in the house when I got to it. I saw them through the window. Here we are. This is it. Pull in close.’

Bertie stopped the car with two wheels on the verge. Biggles sprang out. ‘Ginger,’ he called.

Ginger rose up out of the heather.

‘Have you seen that old Bentley go past here?’ rapped out Biggles.

‘No.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Of course. I haven’t left the side of the road. Several cars have gone past, but no Bentley.’

Biggles drew a deep breath. ‘That settles that then. It must have gone another way. Pity.’

‘What’s all the fuss about, anyhow?’ asked Bertie. ‘Is it something to do with the passenger in the car?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who was it? Did you know him?’

‘Too true I knew him. Fasten your safety belt. You’re not going to believe this. It was “Cracker” Lewis.’

Silence.

Then Bertie said. ‘Oh no. It isn’t true. Are you sure about this?’

‘Of course I’m sure.’

‘But it doesn’t make sense!’

‘It’s *got* to make sense, and it will when I’ve had time to think about it. I have a glimmering already.’

‘But dash it all, old boy, I mean to say, how could there possibly be anything in common between Sir Humphrey and that nasty little gaolbird?’

‘I can think of something.’

‘Like what?’

‘Money. A little matter of the thirty thousand quid in notes that Lewis still has salted away somewhere.’

Ginger whistled softly. ‘How right you are,’ he said softly. ‘That sort of money can make friends of the most unlikely people.’

‘By the look of his place our charming baronet could certainly do with some of it,’ went on Biggles. ‘I imagine that’s what he’s after. What else could it be? But he’s not likely to get a share of it for nothing. Does that suggest anything to you?’

Bertie answered. ‘Not on the spur of the moment, I must admit.’

‘It does to me. But we’ve been here long enough. Let’s move on a bit, as far as that next dip where the car couldn’t be seen by anyone on the moor.’

They all got into the car and Bertie drove on some little distance before

again pulling into the side of the road. 'What was your idea?' he asked, as Biggles lit a cigarette.

'Simply this. I'd make a wager that Cracker Lewis would be more than willing to hand over ten thousand nicker to anyone who would guarantee to get him out of the country with the rest of his swag. Money's no use to him while he's behind bars.'

'You've hit it,' declared Bertie. 'Hit it right on the boko. Jolly good. But tell me this. I may be a bit slow on the uptake, but how could our noble baronet guarantee to get his crooked pal out of the country?'

'If my guess is right he'd arrange for someone to fly him out.'

'So *that's* what the intruder is doing,' breathed Ginger.

'That's how it looks to me.'

'And you think that's going to happen tonight?'

'I did at first, but now I've had time to think I've changed my mind.'

There's a snag. I doubt if it will be tonight.'

'Why not?'

'Because there's one little job that will have to be done before Lewis can repay Sir Humphrey for his hospitality. Lewis has only just got out of gaol. He wouldn't have the money on him when he escaped. It'll have to be fetched from where he hid it after the robbery. Maybe that's what the Bentley is doing now. Cracker wouldn't be likely to tell Sir Humphrey where it is and leave him to go alone to fetch it. He might grab the lot, and Cracker, in his position, wouldn't be able to do anything about it. That, I fancy, is why they've gone together.'

'Then all we have to do is call in the police and trap the pair of them when they return to Hallstone Towers with the lolly on them.'

'No. It isn't as easy as that. They may not go back to the house. Think what fools we should look if we raided the house and found nothing or nobody there. We shall have to think of something else. I'd rather be sure of my ground before we jump in. This may turn out to be a bigger business than the capture of one man — Cracker Lewis. Another thought has just struck me. It's this. For a rough guess, without the records, I can think of at least five gaol-breaks over the past six months. None of the men has been recaptured. Where are they? Where have they gone? All of them had one thing in common. They all managed to hide their loot before they were picked up and convicted. In view of what's happened tonight I'd say their chances of being recaptured now are pretty remote. They're out of the country; and the stolen money has gone with them — or some of it.'

'They were *flown* out!'

That's how it looks to me.'

'And that's what this night-bird has been doing — fetching them?'

'Subject to confirmation, I'd say yes. There must be an organization behind this. These gaol-breakers all knew where to make for once they were free. Hallstone Towers. Remember the police road block? The constable said it was

thought Lewis was heading in this direction. They were right; but Lewis didn't have to come as far as this. No. He knew where he was going.'

'You talk about confirmation,' put in Ginger. 'How are we going to get it?'

'That's a problem we now have to work out,' Biggles said. 'It's no use looking for that Bentley tonight. As we know, it was topped up with petrol. It might be anywhere between Land's End and John o' Groats.'

'We know its number. Why not put out a general call for it to be stopped?' suggested Bertie.

'We only *think* we know its number. The number plates may have been changed. It's easy enough to put on false ones. Sir Humphrey's no fool. He'd take no chances. From the way this thing is being run, and I suspect it has been going on for some time, there are brains behind it. We shall have to decide quickly what we're going to do; before the car comes back. It might not be too difficult to pick up Sir Humphrey; but how do we know he's the head man of the racket? When we strike we want the whole gang. The man I really want the man we were ordered to find; this night-flying intruder. There are some things we shall have to do right away. The first is to let the Air Commodore know we've struck a hot trail. Another thing we'd better do, if we're going to take on a big gang, is provide ourselves with some guns. I don't feel like taking on men like Cracker Lewis with my bare hands. We've done a good night's work up to now and I don't want to bungle it. Let me think.'

CHAPTER 10

A PLAN AND A PROBLEM

NOBODY spoke for some minutes. They all sat in the car, Biggles with his eyes brooding over the silent and apparently deserted moor. At last Biggles moved. He looked at his watch. 'It's getting on for midnight,' he said, as if reminding himself of the time.

'We've run into a knotty problem,' he went on in a normal voice. 'It would be easy at this stage to make a mess of things. The trouble is, practically all we know, or think we know, is based on surmise. That's no use. We need evidence. Proof. How are we going to get it?'

'You've seen Lewis with Trethallan,' reminded Ginger. 'Isn't that proof?'

'No. My unsubstantiated word wouldn't hold up in court. As things stand we haven't a shred of evidence of Sir Humphrey's association with Lewis. Whatever we know, or think we know, we've no case against him. There are two big questions still to be answered, otherwise we shall be groping in the dark. We know Trethallan has taken Lewis under his wing. They've gone out together. We don't know where they've gone. I can only think it's to fetch the money that Lewis has got hidden somewhere; the fruits of his last bank raid. A man like Trethallan could have no other interest in that crook. For what other possible reason would he lay himself open to a charge of giving house-room to an escaped criminal? The question is, assuming I'm right, having got the money, where will they go? If we're thinking on the right lines, that Trethallan can arrange for Lewis to be flown out of the country, they should come back here. I doubt if Trethallan can fly himself. We've no record of his having been a pilot, or even a member of a flying club. I can't imagine an aircraft being hidden anywhere on the moor. Where is there to hide it? No. The aircraft will be flown here when it's required. I may be wrong, but it is reasonable to suppose that the machine is the intruder we've been looking for. It comes from abroad and returns to its base. I'm pretty sure this isn't the first time this sort of thing has happened. It has been going on for months, and would account for the utter disappearance of other escaped criminals who had money tucked away.'

Ginger spoke. 'Trethallan must have contact with the plane to let the pilot know when a passenger is ready to be picked up. How's that being done? By radio?'

'That seems the most likely method, unless an arrangement has already been made. Where is the radio equipment? It could be at Hallstone Towers or it could be here, at the old mine, where the operator would be in direct touch with weather conditions on the landing ground. When this pick-up will take place we don't know, and are not likely to know. It may be tonight, although that doesn't seem likely in view of the time. It'll start to get light in a few

hours, and there's never been any record of the intruder coming over in the day time. If it isn't tonight, where will Trethallan and Lewis go to wait for zero hour? They'll have to go to some safe place to divide the money. The most probable place would be Hallstone Towers, although it could be here, at the mine. We can't be in two places at once in sufficient force to make an arrest. We might bite off more than we could digest. There must be a sizeable organization behind this racket. Lewis knew where to make for when he was free.' Biggles broke off to light a cigarette.

He continued. 'We know we may have at least four men to contend with, not counting the pilot or crew of the plane. First, there's that phoney shepherd. He knows what's going on. Then there's the tough who tackled Ginger when he was treed by the dog. He's one of them. That's proved by the fact that the dog knew him. Now there's Trethallan and Lewis. We can't expect them to submit without a struggle. The chances are they're armed. We haven't a weapon between us, so we're in no case to take on several armed men. I'd feel more comfortable even now with a gun in my pocket.'

'What about calling in the police?' suggested Bertie.

Biggles shook his head. 'I feel it's too early to call on the police for help. It would be hard to convince them about what's going on. With no concrete evidence to show, that would be understandable. They wouldn't want to make fools of themselves any more than we do.'

'Well, what *are* we going to do?' asked Ginger. 'We shall soon have to make up our minds.'

'You're dead right.' Biggles went on as if he'd reached a decision. 'I don't like leaving this place. Anything could happen, any time. If it should happen that while we were away the plane slipped in and collected Lewis we'd be left standing on one foot. We wouldn't know anything about it; we wouldn't even know that Lewis had gone; and as I've said, we'd have no case against anyone here.'

'So what?'

'I can see only one way to handle this,' Biggles said. 'Ginger, you'll go to Headquarters and tell the Air Commodore how things stand. Come straight back bringing three guns with you. That means if you take the car we shall need another. We'd be helpless here without transport. Anyway, this one has been here on the road for so long that it must be getting conspicuous. Bertie, you'll have to watch Hallstone Towers in case Trethallan and Lewis go back there. I'll keep watch here to check if they come here to rendezvous with the plane, should that have been arranged. Now, this is the order of it. Bertie, you'll slip into Bodmin right away, taking Ginger with you. There you'll hire a car. If you can't find a garage open you'll have to ask the police to find you one; but don't do that unless it's necessary. Maybe they'll let you have one of theirs. You've got your Yard identity card on you?'

'Of course.'

'All right. You'll come back here with two cars. You, Ginger, will then

press on for London in our own car. Get back as quickly as you can but don't risk breaking your neck. As long as you're back here tomorrow before dark it will be okay. Nothing is likely to happen in daylight. Got that?

'Will do.'

'Using the spare car I shall take Bertie to Hallstone Towers where he'll have to plant himself out of sight to watch the place. I shall come back here to watch the moor. Right?'

'Okay. But how do I get back?' Bertie asked.

'I'll fetch you as soon as it's daylight. I don't think you need stay after that. It might be risky, anyhow. I'm sorry to have to split up the party but I see no alternative. It's vital that we should know if anything happens tonight and this seems the only way of doing it. If nothing happens, well, we get a breathing space to plan something for tomorrow night. Is that all clear? Any questions?'

There were no questions.

'Right,' said Biggles. 'Let's get on with it.' He got out of the car. Bertie, with Ginger beside him, drove off down the Bodmin road. Biggles sat down to wait, always watching the lonely stretch of country in front of him.

An hour later two cars arrived together and stopped. One was their own, with Ginger at the wheel, the other a Morris, Bertie driving.

'Good work,' said Biggles. 'Okay, Ginger. Off you go.'

Ginger departed, heading for London.

Biggles got into the second car. 'You know where we're going,' he told Bertie. 'I want to be back here as soon as possible.'

Bertie drove on, and with little or no traffic on the road was soon outside the drive that led to Hallstone Towers. He did not stop there, but on Biggles' instructions went on a little way before pulling up. He got out. Biggles slipped into the driving seat. 'I'll be back to pick you up soon after daylight,' he said. 'Careful how you go.'

'Leave it to me, old boy.'

'Be seeing you.' Biggles returned to the moor, pulling in at the place where they had recently stopped, just off the road. He switched off all lights, made himself comfortable in the heather and prepared for a long wait. In front of him lay the moor. To left and right the road ran on to fade and finally disappear into the gloom.

Would the airborne invader come tonight? was the thought uppermost in his mind. From what he knew he did not think so. He hoped it would not, or he would find himself opposed, single-handed and unarmed, to what would certainly be a dangerous gang. More than anything he wanted to intercept the plane and keep it grounded; to learn its nationality and establish the identity of the pilot. That was what the Air Commodore wanted to know; to learn if the purpose of the intruder's mission was criminal or political — that is, espionage.

Biggles thought he now knew the answer to that. The arrival of Cracker Lewis on the scene had revealed it. Either way it could not be allowed to go

on, flaunting both the law and Air Traffic Regulations. So pondered Biggles, as he gazed across the desolate expanse of moorland in the direction of the supposed landing strip. Not a light showed. Always keeping an ear to the sky for the sound of an aero engine, he waited.

Time passed. Nothing happened. There was a little traffic on the road; an occasional long-distance lorry, a milk-collecting truck and a few private cars. He looked hard at all the vehicles that passed, but none was the car with which he was concerned. The Bentley.

By three o'clock time had begun to drag. Not until six would dawn creep up over the horizon. There was nothing to relieve the boredom. Fortunately the weather was mild or the vigil would have been even more tedious.

However, the longest night has to come to an end, and it was with heart-felt relief that Biggles at long last saw a grey streak appear in the eastern sky to tell of the coming of another day. Nothing had happened, and it now seemed unlikely that anything would happen during the next fourteen or fifteen hours. He waited another five minutes, by which time through a misty twilight he could see some distance across the moor; then, rising and stretching his stiff limbs, he got into the car and set off to fetch Bertie, as had been arranged. It would, he thought, be interesting to know if he had anything to report. The most important thing was, had the Bentley returned to the house?

He drove slowly, still keeping an eye on the moor, while it was in view, for any sign of activity. He saw nothing except the rolling landscape. Once clear he increased his speed and in twenty minutes was passing the broken pillars at the entrance to Hallstone Towers. Bertie was not there. He did not expect him to be, so he carried on up the hill to where the lane widened. This was the rendezvous. Bertie was not there, either. This did not worry him. No actual time had been set for the appointment. Bertie would, he was sure, be along at any moment, so he settled down in the car and lit a cigarette, prepared to wait.

After a little while and Bertie had not shown up he felt his first twinge of concern. It was now daylight, and he could think of no reason why Bertie, after a night out, should linger longer than was absolutely necessary. Another ten minutes and concern had become anxiety. What on earth could Bertie be doing? What could be keeping him?

Leaving the car he walked down to the drive. There was nobody there. He whistled softly. This produced no result. Now seriously alarmed he walked a little way up the drive looking for signs of Bertie's occupation. He thought he may have found it when he observed a spot where the bracken had been crushed flat as if someone had rested there. He noticed something else; something that puzzled him. The place was strewn with small chips as if someone had whittled a stick. Would Bertie have done that? He might. Lying near was a fallen branch from which the stick had apparently been cut with a small knife.

Not knowing quite what to make of it, he went on up the drive, as far as he

dare without taking a risk of being seen from the house. Peering through the shrubs he saw the house. He also saw something else. Standing by the door was the Bentley. So the owner had returned. It was useful to know that. But where was Bertie? What could have happened to him? Obviously something had gone wrong. But if Bertie had done his job properly what *could* have gone wrong? With the return of the Bentley there was all the more reason to be at the rendezvous to report it.

With his alarm becoming acute Biggles hurried back down the drive and up the hill to the car, hoping to find Bertie there. He was not. It was now evident that something had happened. Moreover, it must have been something serious.

Still hoping Bertie would eventually turn up he got into the car, prepared to wait. He could think of nothing else to do. It would, he thought, be folly to go near the house. In any case, what could he hope to gain by that? So he waited. He waited for half-an-hour. Still Bertie did not appear. He decided it was no use waiting any longer. Had it been possible Bertie would be here by now, he told himself. The fact had to be faced. The plan, for some unknown reason, had come unstuck. It was hard to know what to do for the best. To go near the house in broad daylight would be to risk wrecking: everything. Trethallan, should he see him, would recognize him as the man he had spoken to on the road. Lewis, should he, too, have returned to the Towers, would also recognize him as a Scotland Yard detective who had given evidence against him in court.

At the finish of his deliberations Biggles resolved to return to the hotel at Bodmin, thinking there was just a chance there might be a message there from Bertie. Or possibly Ginger, although it was no use expecting him back from London for some hours yet. Apart from that, he needed some breakfast. The keen morning air had given him an appetite, and in view of what had happened it might be a long time before he would get a chance for another meal. Anyway, should Bertie belatedly arrive at the rendezvous and find the car gone he would guess what had happened and in all probability start walking towards Bodmin expecting to meet the car coming back to look for him; or find it waiting on the main road where it crossed the moor.

Reluctantly Biggles started on the return journey. He went dead slow past the broken pillars, hoping against hope that he would see Bertie coming down the drive. In this he was disappointed. He even gave a gentle hoot on the horn. Nothing happened, so he had no alternative than to go on. In due course he reached the road that crossed the moor. The first thing that caught his eye as he gazed across the heather was the shepherd, his dog and his little flock, on the supposed landing strip close to the mine. What did that signify — if in fact it meant anything?

He didn't stop, but carried on to Bodmin and the hotel. There was no message, either from Bertie, Ginger or anyone else.

CHAPTER 11

MORE SURPRISES

BIGGLES had a quick bath to refresh himself after having been up all night, and afterwards some breakfast, all the time wondering what he should do about Bertie. On the face of it there was not much he could do. He felt, naturally, that he should start looking for him. But where? He might be at Hallstone Towers; on the other hand he might not. To go near the house was likely to do more harm than good. To try to gain an entry like a thief would be to exceed his authority, even as a policeman, and land him in trouble. Yet to go to the door to make inquiries would be futile, for if he was there Trethallan would not be likely to admit it. If Bertie was not at the Towers he might be anywhere.

Now in a state of apprehension Biggles felt he could not just sit still and do nothing. He went out, took the car to the garage to have the tank topped up and then made again for Hallstone Towers, thinking, but without much hope, that he might see Bertie, or find a clue to account for his disappearance; possibly even meet him walking back.

He did not meet him. He did not find a clue. He went as far as the rendezvous. He was not there. He waited for an hour. Then, no longer able to deceive himself that there was any hope of Bertie turning up, he cruised back to the moor and stopped in the usual place, the dip in the road where the car could not be seen from the mine. There, not knowing what else to do, he decided to await Ginger's return, although this would not be for some time.

The moor lay as deserted as usual. The shepherd and his flock were no longer there. Why? Where had they gone? He did not waste time in what obviously would be futile speculation.

It had turned three when he saw the car for which he had been waiting coming up the road. It stopped. Ginger got out. He was followed by Algy.

Biggles' eyebrows went up. 'What are you doing here?'

'The Air Commodore insisted on it.'

'Why?'

'He knows the position and thought you might need help.'

'What about the telephone?'

'He's taking over. When he goes home all calls for our section will be switched through to him. That will cover any radar signal that might come through about the intruder being on the job.'

'I see.'

Ginger, who had been looking round, asked the natural question. 'Where's Bertie?'

'I've lost him,' returned Biggles morosely.

'Lost him! How?'

‘When I went to the Towers to pick him up he wasn’t there. I haven’t seen a sign of him since I left him there.’

Ginger grimaced. ‘I don’t like the sound of that.’

‘Nor I.’

‘What have you done about it?’

‘Not much, I must admit. I’ve been back over the road to the place where I was to pick him up. I’ve been a little way up the drive that leads to the house but I daren’t go too close.’

‘What do you suppose could have happened to him?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine.’

‘He must have run into trouble.’

‘That’s fairly obvious or he’d have met me as arranged.’

‘What are we going to do about it?’

‘Frankly, I don’t know.’

‘We shall have to do something.’

‘I think we’d better wait for a bit to see if he turns up before we do anything desperate. I can tell you this. The Bentley is back at the Towers. I saw it standing by the front door. How long it had been there, of course, I’ve no idea. Nor do I know if Cracker Lewis came back with it. Did you bring the pistols?’

Ginger fetched a .38 automatic from the car and handed it over. ‘I’d better leave Bertie’s in the car,’ he said.

Biggles put the gun in his pocket. ‘That feels better. I have a hunch I shall need this before we’ve finished here. Now, before we go any farther, what had the Air Commodore to say about all this?’

‘He was delighted to learn we’d struck a trail, but was a bit worried when he heard about Lewis being here, thinking we might get hurt. He’s a desperate character and it’s known he carries a gun. That’s why he insisted on Algy coming back with me. He thought we might need help. He did talk about coming down himself, but I said I didn’t think there was any necessity for that — not yet, anyway.’

‘Never mind about that,’ broke in Algy. ‘What are we going to do about Bertie? That’s what I want to know.’

‘That’s what I want to know, too,’ answered Biggles, grimly. ‘Ginger, how long is it since you had anything to eat?’

‘Nothing since last night. Knowing you were waiting for me I came straight back without bothering about food.’

‘In that case we’d better all go to Bodmin and get a meal while we have the opportunity. Anything could happen, and it may be some time before we have another chance. We’ll talk things over; maybe run out again to the Towers to see if there’s anything doing there.’

‘I know Bertie,’ declared Algy. ‘Only trouble in a big way would have prevented him keeping the appointment with you.’

‘You needn’t tell me,’ retorted Biggles. ‘Let’s go. I’m sick of staring at this

perishing moor. We shall have to come back to it, of course. Sooner or later that Bentley should come along to bring Lewis to the landing ground. At least, that's how I see it. That hired car can go back to the garage. I don't think we shall need it now. If we do we can always fetch it.'

They got into the two cars and drove off in the direction of Bodmin.

After a wash and brush up, which Ginger needed after his long run, they had a meal, still, of course, discussing the situation. From time to time Biggles went to the hall porter to ask if there was a message for him, but the answer was always the same. No message. Time went on. Bertie did not appear.

The first shades of evening were falling when Algy spoke impatiently. 'This is no use,' he declared. 'Talking is getting us nowhere. We shall have to do something about Bertie.'

'Do what?' inquired Biggles dolorously. 'You tell me. I can't see that we can do anything. To wander about the moor, or hang around the Towers on the off-chance of finding him seems a pretty hopeless business.'

'It'd be better to do that than sit here doing nothing,' Ginger said.

'There's nothing to stop you from trying it, if that's how you feel,' Biggles told him.

'I'd bet any money Bertie is in Hallstone Towers,' averred Algy. 'He isn't on the moor. What is there to do there? If he was free to come home he'd have been here long ago. No. He was spotted prowling about the Towers and taken inside.'

'I'm inclined to agree with you,' conceded Biggles. 'All right. Let's assume he's in the house, presumably a prisoner. What do you suggest we do about it?'

'Go there and get him out.'

'Are you proposing that we break in?'

'Why not?'

'For the very good reason that we've no right to do anything of the sort. If it turned out that Bertie wasn't there, and Sir Humphrey made a complaint, as he probably would, there'd be one hell of a row about it and the Press would shoot us down in flames.'

'To the devil with what we have a right to do! That's no argument.'

Biggles shook his head. 'I doubt if it would work. Hallstone Towers is a big place. It would need a lot of men to search it properly. We don't know how many people there are inside; Lewis for one; there may be others like him. You can bet they wouldn't take kindly to us going through the place without a warrant.'

'Very well. Then let's call in the local police. Tell them we have reason to believe that the escaped prisoner they're looking for is inside. That should be sufficient reason for them to get a search warrant.'

'Even if they agreed that would take time. It'll soon be dark. By the time the police got to the Towers Lewis could be on his way out of the country. We should still be able to prevent that if his departure is timed for tonight.'

‘How?’

‘By going to the moor and taking up positions near the airstrip. If that plane lands I’ll take damn good care it doesn’t get off again.’

‘We’ve no reason to suppose tonight is the night,’ argued Algy. ‘There’s been no signal from radar, or the Air Commodore would have been on the phone.’

‘It’s early yet. There’s plenty of time for the plane to slip in between now and five o’clock tomorrow morning. Our job is to see it doesn’t get away with it tonight. That’s why we’re here. If it doesn’t come tonight we shall have all day tomorrow to think about it. I’ll ring the Air Commodore first thing in the morning and ask for instructions. Let him take the responsibility. Meanwhile let’s get to the moor. We’re not likely to do any good sitting here.’

‘You could run me out to the Towers and drop me off there to see if anything’s going on,’ suggested Algy. ‘No one there knows me.’

‘All right, if that’s how you feel.’

‘And you could put me off at the moor on the way,’ offered Ginger. ‘I could go across and see if anything is happening at the old mine. We haven’t said anything about that.’

‘What about the dog?’

‘What about it? If he comes for me now I have something in my pocket that’ll stop its yapping.’

‘I’m all against shooting a dog for doing what it’s been trained to do.’

‘If it’s been trained to bite people, that’s its bad luck. I’m not standing for being savaged by any brute, no matter what it’s been trained to do. It may not see me. You can put me off at the far end of the moor so that I can work up to the mine from behind.’

‘Okay, if that’s how you want it. But be careful what you get up to. I’ve one man missing already; I don’t want another. Now let’s get on with it. After dropping Algy at the Towers I shall dash back here to see if there’s a message from Headquarters. If there’s nothing I’ll return to the moor and park in the usual place. That’s where you’ll find me, Ginger, when you get tired of sneaking about in the heather.’

‘Fair enough.’

In a few minutes they were on their way. It was still not quite dark, but twilight had taken possession of the scene by the time they reached the moor. The car was stopped at the far end to enable Ginger to get out and approach his objective from a new angle.

‘You know the scheme,’ Biggles told him. ‘I’m taking Algy on to the Towers. That means I shall have to fetch him later, but I don’t know exactly when that will be. Come to the road when you’ve had enough of the moor. You know where I’ll be. I’m sorry to split up the party like this but I don’t see what else we can do. Be careful.’

Ginger raised a hand. ‘Okay.’

Biggles drove on, slowly, still with one eye on the moor, so to speak, and

had not gone far when a car, actually a light van, coming towards him pulled up level with a squeal of brakes. He felt for his gun, thinking this was an attack; but he left it in his pocket when he saw the car was not the Bentley. He was not a little surprised when he observed that it appeared to be filled with policemen. An inspector got out and came to the window Biggles had opened. 'I thought I recognized your car,' he said in a voice that did not sound very friendly.

'Did you want to see me?'

'Yes.'

'Is something wrong?'

'Plenty.'

Biggles got out of the car. 'What's the trouble?' he asked, puzzled by the Inspector's brusque manner.

'You sent us out on a wild-goose chase.'

'I sent you out? What are you talking about?'

'Where are you off to now?'

'Matter of fact we're on our way to Hallstone Towers.'

'What for?'

'Oh, just to have a look at it.'

'Hoping to find Lewis?'

'Partly.'

'Well, I can save you the trouble,' was the curt rejoinder.

'How do you mean?'

'There's nobody there except a bad-tempered old bitch of a woman.'

Biggles blinked. 'How do you know?' Such was his surprise he had to grope for the words.

'We've been there.'

'You've — been — there!'

'Yes. We've searched the place from top to bottom. It was a waste of time.'

'Who were you looking for?'

'Cracker Lewis, of course.'

'What gave you the idea he was there?' inquired Biggles, trying to keep pace with the situation.

'You said he was there.'

'Me! I never told you anything of the sort.'

'You told your chief in London, didn't you?'

'Yes — but...' Biggles began to see daylight. 'I think you'd better tell me how this came about.'

'You made a report to your chief at the Yard.'

'What of it?'

'He was given to understand you'd seen Lewis at Hallstone.'

'That's right. One of my assistants went in person to explain what was going on here and ask for instructions. He brought Sergeant Lacey, here

beside me, back with him.'

'Well, I had a phone call from Assistant Commissioner Raymond, who I understand is your boss, to ask me to give you all the help I could if you asked for it. He said he thought you might be taking on more than you could cope with.'

Now Biggles understood. 'And Air Commodore Raymond told you Lewis had been seen at Hallstone.'

'Yes.'

'So you decided to grab him.'

'Naturally.'

'Did Raymond ask you to do that?'

'No. Er, not exactly.'

Biggles shook his head sadly. 'I'm afraid you've jumped the gun, Inspector. Lewis is only a small fish in this swim. Did Raymond tell you what we were *really* doing here?'

'No.'

'Then I'd better tell you in the hope of getting this mess straightened out. We've reason to think Bodmin Moor is being used as a landing ground for an aircraft coming in to fly criminals and their swag out of the country. Lewis is one of them. The man behind the organization, at this end, anyway, appears to be Sir Humphrey Trethallan. It may have been one of this gang who shot your Constable Harley.'

The Inspector looked incredulous. 'Good God!'

'We were holding our hand hoping to grab the lot, including the plane and its pilot, in one cast of the net. If Trethallan learns that his house has been raided by the police — well, it won't have improved our chances of doing that.'

'No. I see that. I'm sorry, but I acted for the best.'

'I'm sure you did. Forget it. Let's deal with things as they stand. You say Trethallan and Lewis weren't in the house.'

'If they were we couldn't find 'em.'

'They *were* there. I saw them. They went off together in a car. I had a notion it was to fetch the money Lewis had hidden away. It has never been found. I posted a man to check if they came back. Incidentally, he's disappeared, and I haven't a clue as to what has happened to him. One of my lads is on the moor now, looking for him, but I wouldn't give much for his chances.'

'When you talk of Trethallan going off in his car do you mean that old Bentley?'

'Yes.'

'Well, they must have come back because it's there now, or it was when we left, standing at the front door.'

'The devil it is!'

'It was there when we arrived.'

‘I wish you’d told me you were going there.’

‘I would have done had I been able to find you. I went to your hotel but you were out. Thinking we had no time to lose we pushed on to the Towers. What would you like me to do now?’

‘Give me a minute to think. What I can’t understand is, if the Bentley is at the Towers where the devil have Trethallan and Lewis gone? I had assumed that when the time was ripe for Lewis to be flown out Trethallan would bring him round here in the car and drop him off at the nearest place to the landing strip, which is an area of burnt heather near an old mine. It seems I may have been wrong.’

‘Had you any reason to think the plane would be coming tonight?’

‘No. But I imagined Trethallan wouldn’t want to keep that crook in his house longer than was absolutely necessary. The plane may come tonight; it may not. As a pilot myself I can say that weather conditions for a night landing are okay. I’ve got to catch that plane on the job. We know it has been coming over regularly. It’s giving the Government sleepless nights, thinking the motive might be espionage. If we can nobble that plane it will tell us the answer, and keep Lewis in the country.’

‘Can I do anything about it? What are you going to do?’

‘Well, after what’s happened there’s no point in our going to the Towers, so I shall stay handy until my assistant on the moor comes back. He may be able to tell us something. If you’re not too busy you might stand by to give us a hand should the plane come tonight. If it does it will be before daybreak. We may need help. There are several in the gang here, not counting Lewis and the pilot. Crooks like Lewis won’t be likely to pack up without a fight; we can be sure of that.’

‘All right. I’ll do that,’ agreed the Inspector. ‘I’d give anything to get my hands on the rat who murdered poor Harley. Where would you like us to wait?’

‘Follow me. I’ll take you to the place where my assistant is to meet me when he’s finished on the moor. We made arrangements for that.’

‘Right. Lead the way.’

Biggles got back in his car and in a few minutes was the usual parking place.

The Inspector pulled in behind him.

Biggles got out and walked to his open window. ‘Coming along I was thinking,’ he said. ‘Did you mean it when you said you’d do anything you could to help?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then here’s a little job you might do for me. Ask your driver to run into Bodmin and ask at my hotel if there’s a message for me. Only one man need go. The rest can stay here.’

‘Are you expecting a message?’

‘No. But there might be one. My chief is in touch with the radar stations,

and if they pick up this unidentified plane they'll let him know. He'd pass the message on to me. If such a message came through we should have an early warning of what was likely to happen.'

'I get it. I'll do that.'

The Inspector gave the necessary order and then went on its way, leaving the Inspector and two constables with Biggles, who said: 'While we're waiting we might as well sit down.' They found seats in the heather beside the road.

Nothing happened during the half-hour the car was away. When it returned it pulled up with a dry skid and the constable driver jumped out, holding a slip of paper. 'Here you are, sir,' he said. 'Priority signal from Scotland Yard to Inspector Bigglesworth.'

'That's me.'

'The hall porter was taking the message down when I got there.'

Biggles read it aloud for the benefit of the others who were watching. 'Intruder sighted twenty miles southwest Falmouth on course north-east. Altitude approx. ten thousand. Losing height.' Biggles looked up. 'Good,' he said tersely. 'Now we know where we are. We shouldn't have long to wait. Our best plan, I think, would be to move nearer to what I take to be the landing ground and lie down in the heather. Then, when I give the signal, we'll all rush it together. I expect Trethallan will be along any minute now with Lewis. I'm a bit surprised he isn't here already. He's cutting it fine.' He got up and looked across the moor. 'Hello, what the devil's that?' he exclaimed, pointing to a spark of light that had suddenly appeared.

The Inspector's eyes followed the pointing finger. 'Could it be a landing light?'

'No. It's nowhere near the landing strip.'

'Then it looks as if some damn fool has set the heather on fire,' growled the Inspector. 'Does that lad you've got on the moor smoke?'

'Not often. He wouldn't be likely to smoke on the moor, anyway. He should be back by now. We'd better give him a minute or two or he won't know where to look for me. If he isn't soon here, Algy, you'll have to wait for him. There's no great hurry. On a still night like this we should hear the plane some time before it gets here.'

A couple of minutes passed. 'What can Ginger be doing?' muttered Algy irritably. 'He said he wouldn't be long.'

Biggles shook his head. 'I can't imagine.'

'That fire's spreading,' observed the Inspector. 'If it comes this way we shan't be able to see anything for smoke.'

CHAPTER 12

WHAT HAPPENED TO BERTIE

ALGY was right when he said that only trouble in a big way would have prevented Bertie from keeping his appointment with Biggles. That he brought it on himself is not to be disputed, but faced suddenly with an unexpected situation he acted for the best; as Biggles, he was sure, would have approved. The task he had been set seemed simple enough, and so it would have been had things worked out as Biggles had anticipated. He had assumed, if he hadn't actually taken it for granted, that when Lewis was taken to the landing ground to be flown abroad, Trethallan would bring him in the Bentley to the nearest point on the road. This was a natural supposition, because from the moor to the Towers by road was a distance of some miles; with transport available there was no reason why they should walk, particularly as, after Lewis had been seen off, Trethallan would be anxious to get back to the Towers as quickly as possible. In the event, things did not work out like this. Far from it. What did actually happen, starting at the beginning, was this.

After Biggles had left him Bertie walked down the lane to the drive that led to the Towers. There he paused to look around and listen. All was quiet; dead quiet. Not a sound. So he continued on up the drive looking for a good place in which to conceal himself and observe the Bentley when it returned. That is, *if* it returned. There had been nothing to indicate that it would, but it was a reasonable supposition if Biggles had been right in thinking that the car had gone off to collect the money Lewis had hidden. Obviously, how long the Bentley would be away would depend on how far it had to go.

Bertie, sure that he had plenty of time — as in fact it turned out — walked on until he could see the black bulk of the mansion looming against the sky. Not a light showed anywhere, which made him wonder how Sir Humphrey managed for servants. Were there any? Was the house empty? The fact that no lights were showing proved nothing, he told himself. The staff quarters, if Sir Humphrey did not live in the house alone, which seemed most improbable, might be round at the back. Anyway, it wasn't worth going to any trouble to find out. That wasn't his business.

Going back a little way down the drive he settled on a place from where he would be able to see the front of the house, and as far down the drive as was possible in the dark. It was a moonless night, and the light of the few stars that were showing did not penetrate the leaf-laden branches of the overhanging trees on either side.

Tall bracken flourished on the banks. This offered perfect cover, so taking care not to disturb it more than was unavoidable, he made his way into it for a few yards and settled down to wait.

Taking out his penknife he trimmed the bracken that impeded his view.

This he did more for something to do than for any practical purpose. For the same reason, finding himself sitting on something hard he investigated and found it to be a fallen branch. The thought struck him that a stout stick would be useful should an unfriendly dog come along, so he occupied himself for some time by cutting a straight length out of the branch that would serve as a weapon in an emergency. He had no other.

He was prepared for a long wait, which was just as well, for so it transpired.

It was after three o'clock in the morning when he heard a car change gear in the lane; coming up the hill. This brought him to the alert. Following the sound with his ears he heard the car slow down as it turned into the drive. A moment later he saw the reflection of the headlights in the trees. It came on. He crouched, peering through the fringe of bracken. It went past quickly in a blaze of light, dazzling after the darkness. He could not see who was in it.

This introduced a factor on which he had not reckoned, although perhaps he should have done. He was able to recognize the Bentley by the shape of its body; but nothing more. This was not enough. What Biggles would want to know was, who was in it? Had Trethallan returned alone or had he brought Lewis back with him? That was the fundamental purpose of the exercise; of his being there.

Blaming himself for his stupidity in not making allowances for this, although in fact it was hard to see what more he could have done without risking discovery, he listened. He heard the car stop. The doors slam. Then the front door opened and closed. After that, silence. For a minute or two he sat still, thinking the matter over, reluctant to leave his job half done. He knew the Bentley had returned. That was something. But it was not enough.

Thinking it might still be possible to complete the most important part of his mission, he got up and made his way cautiously towards the house. When he reached the point where the drive widened as it approached the front door, he saw with satisfaction that his luck was in. A light appeared at a window on the ground floor; as if an electric light had been switched on. A shadow moved across it. Someone was in the room. Who was it? It seemed a fairly simple matter to find out.

He advanced, slowly, keeping close against the shrubs, laurels and the like, which here lined the drive. He had not made much progress when he feared he had congratulated himself too soon. The silhouette of a man appeared against the light and in an instant the light was cut out as if curtains had been drawn. But either they had been drawn carelessly or they did not quite meet in the middle, for when they stopped moving, a gap, a narrow slit of light, was left between them.

This is how they had been, Bertie recalled, when Biggles had described how he had seen Lewis in the house. This was probably the same room. Who was in it now? Was Sir Humphrey alone or had he brought the escaped criminal with him? Bertie resolved to find out.

Holding his cudgel, still with the possibility of the guard dog in mind, step by step he made his way to the window, and after a pause to listen for danger, going down on one knee he applied an eye to the gap between the curtains. One glance was enough to reveal everything, and what he saw took his breath away, although he should perhaps have been prepared for something of the sort.

Trethallan and Lewis were both there. But it was not this bare fact that shook him. On a table between them was an open suitcase, the contents of which had apparently just been emptied on the table. It was money; a heap of bank-notes done up in bundles as they are stored in a bank. Trethallan was counting the bundles, making two piles, one on each side of the table in the manner of one for me, one for you.

So Biggles had been right, was the thought that flashed into Bertie's head as he continued to watch this transaction. They had been to fetch the swag and were now busy 'carving it up' between them.

This did not take long. When the operation was finished Lewis packed his share back into the suitcase. Trethallan went to the panelled wall near the fireplace and slid a section of it to one side exposing a cavity. In this he stacked his share of the loot, and closing the panel returned to his companion.

Bertie, deciding he had seen enough, retired to the shrubs to think about it. There was no need for haste. For the moment there was nothing he could do. It would be some time before Biggles came along to pick him up. He considered walking to meet him; but that would mean a change of plan, which he knew from experience was ill-advised as all too often it ended in a muddle.

What did this mean — what he had just seen? Having achieved their purpose would the two men now part company? Would the next move be for them to return to the Bentley so that Trethallan could complete his part of the transaction by taking Lewis to the moor for his final getaway? If this was so did it mean that the intruder aircraft was on its way to pick up the convict and his money? Bertie hesitated, although thinking on these lines the matter suddenly became urgent.

There seemed to be only one way of learning what the two partners in crime intended to do next. This was to wait, and watch. He thought, and hoped, they would not leave the house. Time was getting on. They would not be likely to do anything in broad daylight. That would give him time to report to Biggles what he had seen. Give them all time to do something about it.

This seemed reasonable, and he decided it was the best thing to do. Had the operation continued to work out as Biggles had imagined it would, and the signs all pointed to that, all might have been well. Instead, they took an entirely different course, one that did not fit into Biggles' scheme at all.

Bertie backed a little way down the drive and took up a position in the bracken from which he would be able to keep an eye on the house, the lighted window and the front door. Should the two men leave the house it would be, he was sure, by this door; and in this respect, at least, he was right.

He looked at the sky. There was still no sign of dawn, so there was no point in going yet to the rendezvous. Biggles would not be there. He would stick to the letter of the arrangement. Had Bertie thought there was the slightest chance of Biggles arriving early he would have hurried to the meeting place to unload his vital information, and leave the next move to him. But Biggles would still be watching the moor, and would not be likely to leave it until daylight put an end to any chance of the plane coming that night.

So Bertie could only wait, which was a pity, although to say this was a mistake would be going too far, and unfair to Bertie, whose state of mind can be imagined.

After some ten minutes or so the light in the room was switched off. A little later the front door was opened. Trethallan and Lewis came out. It was dark, but there was just enough starlight for the figures to be recognized. Lewis carried a suitcase; no doubt the case containing the stolen money. So they were leaving after all. Naturally, Bertie thought they were about to drive off in the car. Indeed, no other thought occurred to him. This dismayed him, for having no transport himself it meant he would lose them. But this did not happen. What did happen struck him at the time as even worse. The two men started walking briskly down the drive. All Bertie could do was crouch back in the bracken, hiding his face, trusting they would not see him. In the event he need not have feared. The men did not reach him. The footsteps stopped abruptly. Holding breath he waited for them to continue. They did not. Nothing happened. What were the men doing? Where had they gone? After a few palpitating seconds risked a peep. They were not in sight.

Taken by surprise, and not a little astonished. Bertie realized that only one thing could have happened. The men had left the drive. How? Where? Creeping along a little way he discovered the answers when he came to a much overgrown footpath, leading off through the bushes. Where were they going, and for what purpose? wondered Bertie desperately, thrown into confusion by a development so unexpected. What should he do? It had happened so suddenly there had been no time think. Should he follow? It would obviously be dangerous; the men might stop or he might run into them coming back; but that was a secondary consideration. It was the difficulty of pursuit in the darkness, not having the least idea of what lay ahead, that made him hesitate. He was afraid of doing the wrong thing. On the other hand, he was in a position, should things go well, to obtain information that could be of vital importance.

It was a murmur of voices some distance ahead that decided him. While he could hear the men talking would be able to judge where they were, how far they were in front of him. With his hands held in front of his face to protect his eyes from projecting twigs which in the darkness he would be unable to see, he set off along the path.

Soon, to his great relief, the footpath ran across more open ground. This enabled him to see a light that jerked about as if one of the men, probably

Trethallan, was carrying a torch. Trethallan, no doubt knowing the ground, would be showing the way. It seemed more than likely that he was on his own property, reasoned Bertie. The light made things easier for him, but that is not to say he was happy. Far from it. On the contrary he was worried. Was he doing the right thing or should he have gone to the rendezvous? But he decided he had gone too far to go back. Having started he might as well see the business through to the end, wherever and whatever that might be.

The path meandered on interminably. He had no reason to think the journey would be a short one, but he did not expect it to be as long as this. Where on earth could the men be going? He reckoned they must have covered well over a mile, sometimes uphill, sometimes down. Where was it going to end? What could be the object of such an expedition at such an hour?

He still had not suspected the truth when the terrain began to change. The deciduous trees, with an undergrowth of shrubs and bracken, gave way to a stand of Scots pines with a thick carpet of needles under foot. There was less risk here of making a sound that might betray him; but the trees being widely spaced there was more chance of him being seen should the light be turned in his direction. He tried to avoid this by moving swiftly from tree to tree, pausing briefly behind each one before going on. This had the disadvantage of allowing two men to get farther in front; but this did not worry him while he could still see the light of the torch.

The path, now only faintly discernible, ran up some gently rising ground; evidently a hill, or a knoll. The light disappeared over the top. When he reached the spot, which he had approached with extra caution, it was not to be seen. Apparently it had been switched off as no longer necessary. The reason for this was plain to see. Below the hill the ground rolled away in flat open country for as far as it was possible for the eyes to follow it in a misty gloom. The men he had been following were not in sight. At all events, he couldn't see them. They had completely disappeared. Where had they gone? What was this place?

For a few moments Bertie stared, frowning uncomprehendingly. Then the truth dawned on him. This was the moor. Bodmin Moor. Of course. Trethallan, knowing the ground, had taken a short cut. Biggles had been wrong in his conviction that when Lewis was brought to the landing ground it would be by road, in the car. That the trip might be made on foot had not occurred to any of them, the reason being, understandably, that the distance by road between the moor and the Towers was something like ten miles. It now appeared that cross-country, as the crow flies, for a rough guess it was not much more than two miles.

So there Bertie stood, bemused, staring at the wilderness of heather stretching away in front of him, colourless in the feeble moonlight. He had no idea of which part of the moor he was looking at. To make matters worse he had lost the men. It was reasonable to suppose they were making for the landing strip. But where was it? In which direction? Looking at the moor from

a new angle he couldn't even guess. To hope to come on it in the dark by accident was hardly worth considering.

The fact that Lewis was carrying a suitcase now became significant. His share of the money was in it. That could only mean one thing. He would not be going back to the house. He was on his way out. Now. Tonight — or early morning as it was now. Trethallan was with him to act as guide; to show him the way to the old mine which marked the landing ground. Yes, that was the answer. Bertie was sure of it. He could think of no other explanation to account for what had happened.

What should he do? Or rather, what *could* he do? Biggles, he did not doubt, was still on the road, watching. He would not leave until daybreak. That was fast approaching, but as yet there was no indication of it in the sky. Biggles should know what was going on. At once. It was imperative. But how could he get to him?

Bertie fretted. To retrace his steps to the Towers, even if he could find his way — and of this he was by no means sure — would be useless. He would arrive at the meeting place too late. The bird would have flown — literally. The alternative was to walk across the moor to the road. If he could find it. In which direction did it lie? To go the wrong way would only make matters worse. He looked for lights of cars moving on the road; but either there was no traffic at this hour before dawn, or there was just sufficient mist, rising as usual, to reduce visibility very considerably. It was impossible in such conditions to judge distance. The road might be no more than half a mile away, but for all he knew it might equally be two or three miles. He wasn't sure, but the mist seemed to be thickening instead of dispersing.

This question of poor visibility introduced another factor. Would the plane attempt to land in such conditions? He thought not. Thinking as a pilot, first there would be the difficulty of locating the moor, let alone the strip. To put the aircraft down without mishap would be even more difficult. Even if lights were put out to mark the spot, they would hardly be the powerful sort used on commercial airfields. In view of what he was doing the pilot wouldn't risk a crash. Wherefore it seemed that if landing arrangements had been made for that night, it might be found necessary to postpone them; that was assuming Trethallan was in radio contact with the plane. The mist would clear quickly when the sun came up; but then it would be light. Would the plane risk landing in daylight? It seemed highly improbable.

So reasoned Bertie, these thoughts going through his head faster than they take to tell. If the flight had to be postponed, all might yet be well. But he was still undecided about which course to take; to try to find the road, or to go back the way he had come, hoping to find Biggles waiting for him. But that would serve no useful purpose if the plane had come and gone.

Somewhere in the distance a car horn hooted. A welcome and familiar sound. He looked hard in the direction from which he thought it had come; but he could see no light; nothing. However, this decided him. The car that

had sounded its horn could only be on the road. He started off at a trot, trusting to be able to keep his sense of direction. Apart from long heather impeding his progress somewhat, there was no difficulty until he came to a peculiar configuration of the ground, and he did not seriously regard this as an obstacle. It consisted of a number of mounds in the manner of enormous molehills, some twenty or thirty feet high. They were covered, like everything else, with heather. What had caused these humps he did not know, nor did he give the matter any consideration. He had only one thing in mind. To get to the road. So he hurried on between them, worried because he had never previously seen this part of the moor, and so could only conclude he was some distance from his objective.

It was not until he came upon some ancient brickwork that the truth hit him. This was the site of another old mine, and the mounds were the tips, the heaps of discarded debris thrown up when the mine was being worked. Judging from the growth of heather and weeds that had taken possession of them, this must have been a long time ago. Anyway, there was no chimney stack so it was not the mine he knew, the one not far from the landing strip; so there was no fear of encountering the shepherd's dog. Having realized the sort of ground he was on he should, of course, have proceeded with extra care; he knew the danger of such places, and had in fact pointed them out to Biggles when speaking of these old mines.

But it is easy to criticize. Bertie's mind was entirely taken up with getting to the road in the shortest possible time, so he hurried on regardless. He was looking ahead to mark the next hillock, in order to avoid it, when without warning his feet went through the heather into a void. Feeling himself falling he made a desperate effort to save himself, clutching wildly at the heather. For a few seconds he clung to it, trying to drag himself back; but it tore out by the roots and he fell into space, still snatching for something, anything, that might break his fall. He struck hard ground with a bump and rolled on, his fingers clawing into loose shale which, sliding with him, offered no hold.

The end came when his head struck something hard, and the world exploded in a shower of stars that faded quickly to utter darkness.

CHAPTER 13

THE PIT

WHEN Bertie opened his eyes he was at first conscious of only one thing. A throbbing head. A little later he saw above him a circular patch of sky. Still dazed, he struggled into a sitting position and tried to remember what had happened. Slowly it all came back. The Towers: the two men he had followed; the moor; the fall. With broad daylight above, he realized he must have been unconscious for a long time. He looked at his watch. The glass had gone, the face was smashed, so it told him nothing.

The next thing he did was to examine himself for injuries and was relieved to find no broken bones. That, he told himself, was something to be thankful for. The only real damage appeared to be to his head, which ached unmercifully. He felt it tenderly and found dry blood on his face. Beside him was the rock that had done the mischief. Close by it lay his cudgel.

At the bottom of the hole into which he had fallen, just below him, was a puddle of surface water that must have drained in. He made his way to it unsteadily, soaked his handkerchief and bathed his head, afterwards leaving the wet rag on as a bandage. This needed effort and he had to rest for a while. His thoughts became more coherent. Had the plane come? Had Lewis escaped after all? It had been near dawn when the accident happened. The moor had been misty. He comforted himself with the possibility of the flight having been postponed.

Calling himself hard names for not looking where he was going, he examined his surroundings and observed that his position might have been worse. Much worse. While he was actually falling, for a dreadful moment he felt sure he had stepped into an old mine shaft, perhaps of great depth. That would have been the end, without any shadow of doubt. He saw that things were not as bad as that, although they were serious enough. The hole into which he had fallen was shaped like an inverted cone, about thirty feet deep, as if there had once been a mine there and a half-hearted attempt had been made to fill it in after it was abandoned. Either that, or the place had been used only for opencast mining. The sides were not sheer, but steep; too steep for herbage, heather or anything else, to get a hold on it. The actual soil was a mixture of gravel and shale.

He sat on the rock which his head had struck. The movement produced dizziness and a feeling of nausea. This suggested concussion, and he thought it prudent to rest for a while before he did anything or he might fall again with more serious results. There was no urgency now that it was daylight, although the others would be in a state wondering what had become of him. Naturally, he was anxious to get out of the trap into which he had fallen, to see where he was, and if anything was happening on the moor. This, he saw, was not going

to be easy; but just how difficult it was to prove he still had not realized.

His eyes wandered round. They came to rest on something he had not previously noticed; a hole that appeared to be the entrance to a cave, or more likely, the mine. Originally it had been shored up with timber, but some of this had collapsed, leaving an irregularly shaped opening. He worked it out that this must have been a passage through which waste material had been carried to produce the mounds above.

Still unsteady on his feet he walked over to it and tried to peer inside; but it was pitch dark and he could see nothing. A curious smell reached his nostrils to make him sniff; an unnatural smell considering where he was. It reminded him of an unventilated room with people in it. He even thought he could detect the unmistakable aroma of coffee. This was ridiculous, he told himself, wondering if he was really fully conscious. How could anyone be inside? Thinking it over it occurred to him that the source of the smell might be some distance away. Somewhere there might be another shaft creating a draught. Was this part of an old ventilation system? It could be. He was not a miner, but he seemed to recollect reading that in the early days of mining this sort of thing was constructed to prevent the air in the mine from becoming foul.

At this juncture it did not occur to him to investigate. He was in no state to start exploring. He was in enough trouble without making matters worse. He had no means of illumination except his petrol lighter, and as that might give out he decided it would be folly to take unnecessary risks.

Feeling his strength returning he turned his attention to a more practical project; that of getting out of the place and back on to the moor. What would happen when he got there he did not know; and he didn't particularly care. The thing was to get out and find the road — and Biggles, who would, he was sure, be somewhere on it. He looked up at the sky. Was it merely overcast or was it getting dark? He found that hard to believe. Was it possible that he had been lying there unconscious all day? It did not seem possible; but presently he had to face the fact that it was evening, and the light was fading.

It was not until he made his first attempt to climb out of the hole that he realized, not without a pang of anxiety, that this was going to be more difficult than he had supposed. And he had chosen what he thought looked the easiest place. He got nowhere near the top. Still feeling sick and giddy he looked for somewhere else. But it was all the same. Loose, friable shale and gravel that crumbled under his hands, offering no hold. It poured down on his head in a little avalanche when he reached up at it, blinding him and filling his mouth with dust.

He made several attempts in different places. Always with the same result. Failure. He had a final go, using his cudgel as a prop. He managed to reach the fringe of heather that hung over the rim, but it came away in his hands and he fell heavily, narrowly missing the rock at the bottom. As it was he was severely shaken, with the breath knocked out of him. It was no use, he told himself lugubriously. If he went on like this he would end up by doing

himself another mischief. He would have to think of something else; and soon, if he was to get out before dark; it was already twilight.

Again he sat on the rock to recover from his shaking and give further thought to his problem. There must be some way out, he told himself in a sort of desperation. He looked again at the cave, or old mine, whatever it might be. It could be the answer, but the thought of going in, not having the remotest idea of where it would end, and without a proper light, appalled him. The whole thing might collapse and bury him for ever. He had risked death many times, but that would not be a nice way to die.

Looking up at the rim of the hole, so near and yet so far away, a thought struck him. If he could set fire to the heather on top it would be seen over a wide area. If Biggles was on the road it was almost certain that he would see it, in which case he could be expected to investigate. It seemed a crazy thing to do, to set fire to the moor, but he didn't care about that as long as it achieved its purpose. Even if Biggles did not come, someone was bound to see the fire and report it. That might bring the police along, or the fire brigade. He didn't care who came, so long as it was someone; otherwise it looked as if he might be stuck in the hole until some wandering hiker found his bones.

The question was, how to set fire to the heather? He knew from walking through it that it was dry and would only need a spark to set it going. This did not seem difficult. In fact, it should be easy, he decided. There was plenty of heather lying about, stuff that he had pulled out in his original fall and later in his attempts to get out. This could be tied in a bunch. All he had to do then was to light it with his lighter and throw it over the top. That should do the trick, he thought confidently.

Another thought struck him, one that gave zest to his project. If the plane had not been and gone this might be the night for it to come. With the moor on fire it would not be able to land. Even if the actual fire did not reach the landing ground the smoke would deter any sane pilot from attempting a landing.

Enthusiastic now that at last he had something to do, he collected a good bunch of heather and tied it in a tight ball with his necktie, leaving a long loose end for handling it, and for the swing that would be necessary to get it over the rim of the hole. This was the work of only a few minutes. He tried a short practice swing to confirm that his firebrand would not come to pieces in flight. It held together. He collected it, and took out his lighter in readiness for the experiment.

A slight sound behind him made him turn, to see a most extraordinary spectacle. It was the end of a ladder. It was emerging from the cave, obviously being carried by someone. He stared incredulously, not without good cause. A man appeared. He was carrying the ladder on his shoulder. The light was not very good but he was able to recognize the shepherd he had seen when he and Biggles had inspected the supposed landing strip.

A ladder! At that moment it was a more welcome sight than a bag of gold.

It seemed too good to be true. The appearance of the man from the cave explained the smell he had noticed. He didn't bother to wonder what the man was doing in the cave. There was only one reason why he should want a ladder; obviously, for the same reason as he himself needed one. To get out of the pit. But would he be allowed to use the ladder? Perhaps not. Not if the man saw him. So he kept perfectly still, hoping the man would not notice him before he had erected the ladder and gone over the top. It was not unreasonable to suppose he would leave it in position against his return.

For a minute it looked as if this might happen. The ladder, one of the aluminium extending sort, took a little while to adjust. It was put up resting against the side of the pit, reaching nearly to the top. This done, the man looked around. For what purpose was not clear. But he looked, and inevitably saw Bertie sitting on his rock. It was his turn to look astonished. He then asked the question that might have been expected. 'What are you doing here?'

'What does it look like?' Bertie answered with a trace of sarcasm. 'I fell into this damned hole, cracked my skull and haven't been able to get out. Am I glad to see you with a ladder!'

The man advanced slowly, for the moment saying nothing. He appeared to be at a loss for words, as was understandable. But it was soon evident that he was not to be taken in by Bertie's casual manner.

'What were you doing when you fell in?' he asked suspiciously.

'Taking a walk on the moor. What else would I be doing?'

'What were you looking for?'

'The road. It was misty and I lost my way. I'd like to get along if you don't mind. My friends will be looking for me.'

'Where are they?'

'Waiting on the road, I imagine. Which is the nearest way to it?'

'They're not on the moor?'

'Not as far as I know.' The instant the words had passed his lips Bertie realized he had made a mistake.

The man confirmed it. 'In that case I'm afraid they'll have to go on waiting for you.'

'What do you mean?'

'You're not using this ladder.'

'Why not?'

The man did not answer. He walked back towards the ladder.

'But look here, I say...' Bertie started to follow, but when the man took a revolver from his pocket and pointed it at him he stopped.

'Stay where you are,' growled the man, and walked on.

Bertie said: 'All right, if that's how you want it, you disagreeable fellow.' He flicked on the lighter and held it under his fireball. As soon as it was well alight he hurled it over the rim of the pit. A brisk crackle told him it was doing what he had intended.

The man must have heard it, or seen the flicker of the flames, for he spun

round. 'What are you doing?' he demanded angrily.

'I've done it, old cock,' answered Bertie, calmly. 'You won't lend me your ladder so I'm letting my friends know where I am.'

For a moment he thought the man was going to shoot him; from the way he pointed the revolver he must have contemplated it. But he thought better of it, perhaps because the sound of the shot would be heard. 'Do you want to set the whole place on fire, you fool?' he shouted furiously.

'Yes,' replied Bertie. 'That's the idea. You've got it.'

The man drew a deep breath, and after a pause, with many a backward glance strode quickly to the ladder. He withdrew the extension, put it on his shoulder and hurried to the cave. At the entrance he stopped only long enough to shout, holding up the revolver: 'You try to follow me and you'll get this.' He went on into the cave.

Bertie was no coward but he had more sense than to follow a man with a gun into a place where he would be at a hopeless disadvantage. The man would see him against the light and no doubt carry out his threat. Inside the cave the report of a shot would be muffled.

So he sat on his rock trying to work out what this strange occurrence might mean. What had been the man's purpose? What did he intend to do now?

He coughed as a wave of smoke rolled down into the pit and the pungent reek of burning heather bit into lungs. More was coming down. There was nothing could do to stop it.

He hadn't thought of this.

CHAPTER 14

TOUGH GOING FOR GINGER

WHEN Ginger left Biggles for his walk across the moor, had anyone asked him exactly what he was going to do he would not have been able to answer. He had a vague idea of getting as close as possible to the old mine, and by using his eyes and ears learn if there was any activity. He felt that the nearby landing ground was the centre of things, and therefore most likely to yield results. Not that he expected to find Bertie there. In his heart he agreed with Biggles. That was too much to hope for. But he thought there was just a chance, however remote, that he might overhear a conversation that would give him a clue as to what had become of him, or better still, where he was. So he carried on across the moor with hope, but without much confidence, that he was not wasting his time.

Twilight had given way to darkness, but it was not a bad sort of night. There was no wind, merely an occasional slight breeze, this being of the sort known as variable. There was no threat of rain. The sky, judging from a sprinkling of early stars, was clear. He would have called conditions for night flying fairly good. What he would do should the intruding plane come in while he was out on the moor, he didn't know. He hadn't thought as far ahead as that. If it came it would probably be later, after he had returned to the road to meet Biggles. If he found nothing of interest, that would be fairly soon. That was his intention. He had no wish to spend more time alone on the moor than was necessary for his purpose.

He stopped several times to look around, bending low to get the configuration of the horizon against the sky, for the ground was strange to him. He had never seen this part of the moor. He was, he reckoned, roughly a mile east of the abandoned mine that was really his objective. As he had said, he thought it more prudent to take this roundabout course rather than walk to it directly across the open heather, when he might be seen by anyone on the watch for strangers.

For some time he could see the road, or rather, the lights of traffic on it; but when the ground began to fall away he was denied this advantage, his view being blocked by the higher ground that intervened. This did not worry him much because he knew, or thought he knew, the general direction. He was also aware that nothing is easier than to lose one's sense of direction on a wide expanse of open ground without a landmark. If he was afraid of anything it was a sudden fog, a not uncommon occurrence on any moor. It was not until later that he became a little uneasy.

Thinking he had gone far enough out to bring him in behind the mine he began to swing towards the left. It was soon after this, peering through the gloom, that he made out an undulating skyline, as if there was a range of low

hills in front of him. He had never noticed them from the road; but he thought nothing of it because he was now looking at the moor from an entirely new angle.

Coming to the first hill, it occurred to him that instead of going round it, as he could have done, if he went over it he would get a wide view from the top; so he continued straight on up the slope. It was not much of a climb, anyhow. On the summit he paused to survey his surroundings. There was little to be seen; no life, no movement. All he learned was that there were other similar hills close by. Whether this was a natural or artificial formation he didn't bother to speculate. He was only concerned with what he was doing, and with keeping his sense of direction.

For as far as he could see the moor lay grim and silent, open to the winds of heaven. Not a light showed anywhere. He appeared to have the world to himself. It looked anything but inviting. However, that was how all moors looked after dark, he ruminated, as he started down the far side of the slope to continue on his way. A few seconds later he was brought to an abrupt halt by the last sound he expected to hear at that particular spot. Human voices. He was astonished. He was also a little alarmed, realizing he was in no position to take on a gang single-handed should they come in collision. As men do not normally talk to themselves there were at least two men not far away. There might be more, and he could not imagine they were anything but enemies.

Again came the murmur of voices. The trouble was, he could not decide the spot, or even the direction, from which they were coming. There was nothing remarkable about this. Any sound coming out of the darkness in conditions such as those in which Ginger found himself are always difficult to locate. They seem to have a ventriloquial effect, as anyone who has ever tried to mark down a corncrake at night will have discovered. The bird is never at the spot where its call is heard.

Ginger stood motionless, listening intently. At this moment, far from trying to see the men who were speaking, he was more anxious to keep clear of them. Again came the voices, muffled, but one raised as if in anger or argument. He stared but could see nothing. Where were these men? What could they be doing, out on the moor without a light? They sounded close; or, at all events, not far away; but just too far for him to catch the words. He should, he thought, be able to see them. To go on would be to risk walking into them.

His nerves tingled when there came a shout.

This was followed by an even more startling event. Out of the ground — or so it appeared — not far in front of him a blazing brand shot into the air. It fell in the heather. Flames leapt up. There came another shout. Then silence; a silence broken only by the crisp crackle of burning heather as the flames began to spread.

Ginger stood as if spellbound. What did all this mean? Not surprisingly he could make nothing of it. There was no more talking but certain curious

sounds suggested a struggle. Loose rock or shale clattered as it fell. What should he do? Get away from the place while the going was good? That seemed the most sensible course. But curiosity held him rigid. He had set out to look for signs of activity but he was not prepared for anything like this. Creeping flames were now throwing a lurid light on the scene but there was still no sign of the men. What had become of them? He stared at the point where the fire had started. He could see it clearly. Beyond was a dark area, apparently something that had prevented the fire from spreading in that direction. What was it? Water? No, that would have reflected the light of the fire. What had become of the men he had heard talking? Had they been there he must have seen them. It was all very strange: incomprehensible.

Sheer curiosity determined Ginger to take a chance and investigate. He had been hoping for something to happen, he brooded. Well, he had found something. Why run away? He had a pistol in his pocket. He took it out. His mind made up, he went on down the hillock, and making a detour to bypass the slowly advancing line of fire he crept on until he was in a position to see what was beyond it. What he saw was a hole in the ground; a gaping pit. He could not see into it but he could hear someone coughing. Creeping forward to the edge he looked down and saw a face looking up. A man with a bandage round his head was leaning on a stick.

Ginger did not recognize him. He watched the man, using his stick, make a run at the side of the pit as if trying to get out. He slid back. He fell. He rose and looked up. He must have seen Ginger's face looking down at him for he called: 'Hello, there! I say, can you get me out of this?'

That, of course, did it. Ginger recognized Bertie's voice. The shock made his brain reel. 'It's me. Ginger,' he managed to get out.

'Jolly good. Never more pleased to see you, dear boy,' came back Bertie. 'You don't happen to have a rope on you?'

'No. Can't you get out?'

'Have a heart! Would I be here choking to death if I could? Do something about it. Buck up. That nasty shepherd fellow isn't far away and he's got a gun.'

Ginger tried to think. It wasn't easy. It was all very well to say get me out, but how was it to be done? 'What can I do?' he asked desperately.

'Make a rope with your shirt, trousers, anything.'

Ginger threw off his jacket and took off his shirt. With his penknife he cut it and tore it up. The sleeves made two strips, the body two more. These he knotted together, all the time wondering if the material would take Bertie's weight. This done, lying on the brink of the crater he lowered the linen line. It was too short. Bertie couldn't reach it.

'You'll have to chuck me *your* shirt to make it long enough,' panted Ginger, coughing in a waft of smoke.

'Here it comes,' Bertie took off his jacket, ripped off his shirt, rolled it round a stone and tossed it up. While he waited he put on his jacket.

Ginger repeated the operation he had performed on his own shirt and tied the two together. After testing it for strength he lowered one end.

By using his stick as a support Bertie was just able to reach it. He hung on, and thrusting his feet against the wall began to climb. Ginger hauled. At the last moment, just as Bertie was within reach of the top, the shirts began to tear. Ginger seized him by the collar of his jacket and dragged him bodily over the brink. Panting, they collapsed in a heap.

‘Thanks, laddie,’ gasped Bertie, as they untangled themselves. ‘I’d been in that beastly hole long enough.’

Ginger looked at him. ‘What have you done to your head?’

‘I tried breaking a rock with it but it didn’t work. The rock was harder than my skull.’

‘Are you all right otherwise?’

‘I think so.’

‘Can you walk? We’ve some way to go.’

‘I’ll have a shot at it. Where are we going?’

‘To the road. Biggles will be there.’

‘How far is it?’

‘A mile, at least.’

‘Give me a minute to get my breath and I’ll be okay,’ Bertie said.

While they rested Ginger said: ‘How long have you been in that hole?’

‘Since early yesterday morning.’

‘Good lor! How did it happen?’

‘I fell in, like a silly ass, not looking where I was putting my feet.’

‘Whom did I hear you talking to?’

‘That phoney shepherd. He found me there; popped out of a hole like a ruddy rabbit. He had a ladder but he wouldn’t lend it to me to get out. He had a gun, so I couldn’t argue.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘He went back down his burrow, which I fancy is a bolt-hole, to ask, I imagine, what should be done with me.’

‘What were you doing when you fell in?’

‘Tracking Trethallan and Lewis. They left the house together on foot and took a short cut to the moor, where I lost them. Lewis has a suitcase full of money with him. I saw them sharing it out. Trethallan left his in the house. I saw where he put it. On the left-hand side of the fireplace there’s a dog’s head carved on the panelling. It pulls out. There’s a drawer behind it.’

‘Where are Trethallan and Lewis now?’

‘I don’t know for sure but I think they were making for the old mine. I believe it has a link with this one.’

‘If that’s where they’ve gone it looks as if the plane may come over tonight,’ Ginger said.

‘That’s what I was thinking. But I say, look at the jolly old fire I started.’

‘I’ve been watching it. If you feel up to it, it’s time we were moving. If the

fire spreads much more it'll cut us off from the road. We shall have to go round it as it is.'

The fire was in fact creeping towards the road on a widening front, throwing up clouds of smoke. Ginger set off at a brisk pace.

Bertie was soon lagging behind. 'Take it easy,' he complained. 'The old head spins a bit and I'm still a bit groggy on my pins. I can't go at that ding-bat pace you're setting.'

Ginger waited impatiently, and it was soon evident that Bertie had understated his condition. He struggled on, but he was obviously making heavy weather of it. To make matters worse the fire prevented a straight walk to the road and they had to make a wide 'dogs-leg' to get round the end of it. They then began to feel the effects of the smoke.

The end came when at last Bertie sank down. 'It's no use, laddie, I can't make it,' he panted. 'Sorry, but I'm done. You'd better go on alone.'

Ginger realized that Bertie had made light of his injury. He was all in, and the violent exertion was doing him no good. On the cinema or television screen it is common to see a man who has been clubbed unconscious with the butt end of a revolver, or some other heavy weapon, rise to his feet within seconds, and resume fighting as if nothing had happened. In real life that does not happen. A man so wounded is usually a bed case in a hospital for at least twenty-four hours, often longer.

Ginger was in a quandary. Bertie was now being sick, and that, he knew, was an almost certain symptom of concussion of the brain. What could he do? He couldn't leave him there, for should he lose consciousness and the fire turn that way he would be burned to death. He would have to get him to a safe place even if he couldn't get him to the road — still a quarter of a mile away as near as he could judge. What he did was give him an arm to help him along.

This worked all right for some distance, with Bertie leaning more and more heavily on his shoulder; then he fell and made no attempt to get up. Ginger knelt beside him but could get no response. He saw he had an unconscious man on his hands. He himself was leg-weary from dragging his feet through long heather.

He looked up in desperation. A car with its headlights on was going down the road at high speed. It didn't look very far away. He knew it couldn't be Biggles, whose car would be stationary, probably off the road showing no lights. No matter, if he couldn't find Biggles someone else might come along to give him a hand. He was afraid Biggles might have left the rendezvous to look at the fire.

Leaving Bertie as he lay he ran towards the road shouting: 'Help! Biggles! Help!' at the top of his voice. He didn't care who heard him. He had only one thought and that was to get Bertie off the moor. The heather tripped him and he often stumbled. Once he fell, but he scrambled on, still shouting, regardless of an increasing pall of smoke as the breeze veered.

He had nearly reached the point of exhaustion when he heard an answering hail. Vague figures took shape in the smoke. He could no longer shout. His mouth was so dry that the sound that left his lips was more like a croak.

A man ran up and caught him by the arm. It was Biggles. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?' he demanded angrily.

'Thank God you've come,' gasped Ginger.

'What's the trouble?'

'Bertie. He's unconscious — back there — in the heather.'

'How far?'

'Two hundred, three hundred yards.'

By this time more figures had closed in, some in police uniform. Ginger pointed. 'He's over there. You can't miss him.'

Biggles sent Algy with two police officers to bring him in. 'How did all this happen?' he said shortly. 'You were supposed to keep quiet. Where did you find Bertie?'

Breathlessly Ginger explained. 'In a pit, an old mine shaft or something of the sort. He was following Trethallan and Lewis to the moor, and in the dark he fell in. He saw them in the house together counting money. Lewis took his share with him in a case. Trethallan put his in a drawer which is opened by pulling on a dog's head carved in the panelling on the left of the fireplace. That's what Bertie told me.'

'Is he badly hurt?'

'I don't know. Not too badly I think. He was conscious when I found him. He struck his head on a rock when he fell.'

'How the devil did you find him?'

'I heard voices. The shepherd was with him in the pit. He had a ladder to get out. And a gun. After an argument he went off in the hole he came out of. Bertie thinks it's a bolt-hole from the mine we know.' Ginger paused for breath.

'Could you find this pit again?'

'Yes. That's where the fire started.'

'How did it start?'

Ginger explained how Bertie had lit the fire as a signal for help. 'That's how I was able to find him.'

Algy and the policemen came back carrying Bertie.

'Let's get to the cars,' Biggles said tersely. 'The sooner he's in hospital the better.'

As they hurried to where the cars had been left, speaking to the Inspector, Biggles went on: 'Does your driver know the way to the hospital?'

'Of course.'

'Then he can take him in. It only needs one man. He can come back here afterwards. If we have a gang to deal with, and I think we have, we shall need all the hands we can muster.'

Bertie, still unconscious, was lifted into the back of the police car and it

departed on its ten-mile journey.

As the sound of its engine faded another became audible. It was the drone of an aircraft, still distant.

Biggles looked up at the sky for possible navigation lights, but failed to find any. 'That must be the plane coming now,' he rapped out. 'We've no time to lose.'

CHAPTER 15

ENTER THE INTRUDER

STILL talking to the Inspector, Biggles went on: 'The first thing we have to do is settle who is going to take charge of this operation. If we both give orders we may get in a muddle. This is your territory. How do you feel about it? It's up to you.'

'You started, so you'd better carry on,' replied the Inspector, generously.

'If that's all right with you. All I want is that plane. You're welcome to Lewis and anyone else you can catch. Be careful. We know one of 'em has a gun. We'll go to what I believe is the landing ground but someone will have to cover that bolt-hole Bertie spoke about. Ginger, you're the only one who knows where it is. A constable had better go with you. Lie low and wait. Should the Inspector blow his whistle join us. You know where we'll be. You're sure you can find the place?'

'Can't miss it. That's where Bertie started the fire so it can only be at the far point of the burnt heather.'

'Right. Off you go. Hurry. Don't use your pistol unless you have to for self-defence.'

Ginger, and an officer detailed by the Inspector, moved off, walking quickly.

'Where do you think the gang will be?' asked the Inspector.

'Probably at the old mine, waiting for the plane to land. When they see things have gone wrong, they may go down the mine and try to get clear by using another exit. My man who was hurt believes there is one. But let's get into position,' Biggles concluded, starting off in a direct line for the landing strip. He was followed by the Inspector, Algy, and the one remaining constable.

'You'd better tell us exactly what you want us to do,' the Inspector said as they marched across the heather.

Biggles answered: 'We'll get as close as we can to the landing ground in long heather, then lie down and wait.'

'And as soon as the plane lands we rush it — is that the idea?'

'No. Not quite. We shall have to wait for Lewis to show himself when he joins the plane. I don't want anyone to move till I give the word. You make sure of Lewis. He's got a load of money on him and may fight to keep it. I'll take care of the plane and the pilot. You stay with me, Algy. There may be more than one man aboard, a navigator or crew.'

'What if it takes off again?' queried the Inspector.

'Once its wheels are on the ground I'll see it doesn't do that,' returned Biggles, cogently.

'How do you know where it will stop?'

‘If I’ve got this worked out correctly it’ll come in from the far end of the strip in order to finish its run as near as possible to the old mine workings. That’s where the others should be waiting. When we move it’ll have to be fast, because if I know anything about this sort of exercise the pilot won’t stay on the ground longer than is absolutely necessary. He’ll know that’s where he’s most vulnerable.’

The Inspector cocked an eye to the sky. ‘I can’t hear him.’

‘He’s probably cut his engine. We shall hear him when he gets lower. An aircraft can’t glide without making a certain amount of noise. Look! The landing lights have been switched on. That’s all the proof we need that the plane is coming here.’

The actual lights, two at each end of the strip, could not be seen. They had apparently been set to show directly upwards, with some sort of shield to prevent them from being seen by anyone on the road. It was on the far side that their reflections could be seen on the heather.

‘Won’t the pilot sheer off when he sees the moor on fire?’ questioned the Inspector.

‘That remains to be seen. No doubt he’ll wonder what has happened, but unless he gets a warning signal I imagine he’ll carry on. There may not have been enough time to cancel the trip, which must have been organized some time ago, before the pilot left his base. The decision about landing will be up to him. I imagine he’ll take the landing lights being on as an okay signal to come in. The fire is some way off, and there’s no smoke on this part of the moor to interfere with visibility. Talk quietly, now. We’re getting close.’

Biggles, leading, stopped in an area of long heather as near the landing ground as he thought it advisable to go. ‘This’ll do,’ he said. ‘Everyone lie down and keep quiet.’

‘I can’t hear the plane,’ whispered the Inspector.

‘You will,’ answered Biggles confidently. ‘It’s no use looking for lights. He won’t be showing any.’

They waited for what seemed a long while, so long that Biggles began to get anxious.

‘I’d say the pilot doesn’t know what to make of the fire,’ whispered Algy.

Biggles agreed. ‘I suppose we must remember, too, that he had a lot of height to slip off.’

A little later Algy said softly: ‘I can hear him. Here he comes.’

Faintly through the still night air came the whistling hum of a gliding aircraft. At the same time a small moving light, as of a hand torch held low, appeared near the old mine workings, less than a hundred yards away.

Biggles did not move.

Thereafter events happened quickly, one following on the other. The hum of the gliding plane became louder as it drew near. Then, suddenly, it was there; a small, single-engined high-wing monoplane, low over the far end of the runway. All that could be seen of it was, of course, its silhouette against

the sky; but there was something about it that made Biggles stare.

‘Great grief!’ exclaimed Algy. ‘It’s fitted with floats. What the devil—’

‘Must be an amphibian,’ muttered Biggles.

‘Looks like a modern improved version of the old German *Storch*.’

‘Don’t talk. Watch.’

The plane came on, losing speed and height. Its floats — or rather, the wheels that were in them — touched, and it ran on to a good three-point landing which the watching pilots could appreciate. It came slowly to a stop. A touch of throttle brought it round in its own length, facing the direction from which it had come, ready for take-off. There was no wind. A side door was opened and a man stepped down, leaving the engine ticking over with the smooth precision of a well-oiled sewing machine. This made it evident that the pilot did not intend to stay long. He stood still, looking towards the old mine. Was he alone, or was there someone else in the plane? was the question uppermost in Biggles’ mind.

Meanwhile, other things were happening. The landing lights went out, their purpose having been served. Two men, one carrying a suitcase, walked quickly towards the plane.

‘Let them get together,’ Biggles told the Inspector, ‘When we go, you take the two coming now. You can leave the pilot to us.’

The Inspector nodded.

The pair who had come from the mine reached the plane. There was a word or two of crisp conversation. Something changed hands.

‘Now,’ said Biggles, and jumping up ran towards the aircraft.

He did not suppose that a party of four men would not be seen, but half the intervening distance had been covered before a startled exclamation made it clear that that was what actually had happened.

Biggles broke into a sprint as the little group scattered. By the time he had reached the plane the pilot was half inside. He seized him by the legs and dragged him out, struggling. Algy went to Biggles’ assistance and between them they got him on the ground, still kicking to get free. Algy knelt on him and showed him his gun saying: ‘Keep still or you’ll get hurt. The game’s up.’

‘Hold him,’ ordered Biggles, and taking out his automatic rose to his feet. He fired two shots through the float into the nearside tyre. There was a hiss of escaping air and the machine settled down with a slight list. Satisfied that the aircraft wouldn’t be able to get off with a flat tyre, he returned to Algy to find the pilot now on his feet. Apparently realizing what had happened he no longer struggled. He shrugged as if resigned, but said nothing.

Biggles got into the cockpit and switched off. Coming back he looked towards the mine to see how the others had fared. In dealing with the pilot he had not been able to see what had happened. The constable was coming towards them with a handcuffed prisoner, and carrying a suitcase.

‘Where’s the Inspector?’ asked Biggles sharply.

‘He’s gone after the other man. We got Lewis but the other one got away.’

‘Which way did he go?’

‘Over there.’ The constable pointed to the mine. ‘He’s gone after him.’

‘Are those the Inspector’s handcuffs or yours?’

‘The Inspector’s.’

‘Have you got yours on you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Handcuff these two prisoners together.’

This was done, Lewis cursing viciously. ‘I told him there was something wrong,’ he snarled.

‘Told who? Trethallan?’

‘Go to hell.’

Another constable ran up; the one who had taken Bertie to hospital. ‘I heard shooting,’ he said. ‘Anyone hurt?’

‘No,’ Biggles told him. ‘We’re all right. I’ll leave the two of you to take care of these prisoners while I go to see if the Inspector needs help.’

‘We should be able to do that,’ answered one of the policeman.

‘Right. Come with me, Algy.’ Biggles set off at a run towards the mine buildings, from where now came the frenzied barking of a dog. He had to dodge a small flock of panic-stricken sheep and made for the broken wall.

‘Where are you, chief?’ he called, reaching it.

‘Here.’ The Inspector appeared. ‘I can’t find him but he must be here somewhere,’ he growled.

‘He may have gone down the mine.’

‘Do you feel like going down to see?’

‘Not me, thank you.’

‘Nor me.’

‘Who was it — Trethallan?’

‘I think so, by his figure. It was the damn smoke or I’d have caught him. Some came this way and got between us. That was the last I saw of him. From the row that blasted dog made I was sure he came in here. Lucky it’s tied up.’

‘Was no one else here?’

‘Not a soul.’

From some little distance off came the crack of a pistol shot.

‘I think I know what that means,’ Biggles said. ‘Someone’s made a break through the bolt-hole; the old shaft that connects with this one.’

‘Then let’s get there.’

‘Not to worry. If it’s Trethallan, and he’s got clear, I fancy I know where we shall find him.’

‘Where?’

‘At home.’

‘Why should he go home after this?’

‘Where else can he go? He’s got a good reason for making for the Towers. His share of Lewis’s money is there. He’ll need it. But before we do anything about that you’d better get the prisoners to the station. We can’t take them

with us. Afterwards we can go on to the Towers.'

'Yes, we'll do that. How many prisoners are there?'

'Two. Lewis and the pilot of the plane. There's a suitcase there, too. I think we shall find Lewis's swag in it.'

'Good. Let's get along.'

They were leaving the ruins when Ginger came hurrying up with the officer who had gone with him. With them, handcuffed, was a prisoner. It was the shepherd — so-called.

'We got one of 'em,' announced Ginger. 'They got out of the pit with a ladder.'

'How many?'

'Two. We grabbed the first one over the top and while we were struggling with him the other climbed out and got away. He pulled a gun and had a crack at us.'

'Did you recognize him?'

'No. What with it being dark, and the smoke, it wasn't easy to see anything.'

'Did he look like Trethallan?'

'Could have been, but I wouldn't swear to it. It was impossible to see anything in the bottom of the pit.'

'Which way did he go?'

'That way.' Ginger pointed.

'That'd be the direction of the Towers,' said the Inspector. 'We'd better get along there as soon as we've cleared up here.'

The party made its way back to the plane, where the other two constables were waiting with their prisoners.

Biggles went to the pilot. 'Where did you start from?' he asked casually.

'I have nothing to say,' was the curt answer, in a pronounced foreign accent.

'Maybe you'll change your mind when you've had time to think about it,' returned Biggles. 'I'm a pilot myself, and my advice to you is, tell us all you know. It'll pay you in the long run.'

'I lost my way and had to make a forced landing.'

Biggles shook his head. 'You'll have to think of a better story than that.' He turned to Lewis. 'Do you know where you were going?'

Lewis spat. 'No. And I wouldn't tell you if I did, copper.'

'Well, you know where you're going now, anyway,' Biggles told him evenly. 'Come on. Inspector, let's get along.'

The entire party walked to the road where the cars were standing. On the way the Inspector asked Biggles what he was going to do about the plane.

'It can stay where it is for the moment,' decided Biggles. 'I'll have a closer look at it in the morning when I can see what I'm doing. It might be a good thing if you could detail a man to keep an eye on it just in case someone tries to destroy the evidence by setting fire to it.'

‘I’ll do that.’

On the road the Inspector took charge and made arrangements quickly. The three prisoners, handcuffed together, were put in the back of the police van with two policemen. The other constable was to drive.

‘Aren’t you going with them?’ Biggles asked the Inspector.

‘No need. The station sergeant can deal with them till I get back. We still have another man to pick up.’

‘And, I suspect, the most important one. It took a man with a brain to organize an escape scheme of this size. Let’s press on, or we might be too late.’

They all got into Biggles’ car; that is, Algy, Ginger and the Inspector. Biggles took the wheel and headed up the road, destination Hallstone Towers.

CHAPTER 16

EXIT THE MASTER-MIND

BIGGLES drove past the broken pillars that marked the entrance of the drive leading to Hallstone Towers, and brought the car to a stop in the lay-by already used on more than one occasion. There they all got out and advanced on foot.

‘This could be a tricky business,’ remarked Biggles to the Inspector as they walked on. ‘It will depend on how Trethallan behaves when you tell him he’s under arrest. Incidentally, what are you going to charge him with?’

‘Aiding and abetting an escaped convict, of course. That’ll do to go on with. We’ve got Lewis as a witness.’

‘What if he denies it and Lewis supports him?’

‘I’ve got you for a witness. You saw them together in the house. So did your man who was taken to hospital.’

‘It should be enough, although it’s only our word against his should he try to brazen it out. We shall see. First we’ve got to catch him. He may have bolted.’

Reaching the drive they walked on to the house without any attempt at concealment. To Biggles’ relief, and somewhat to his surprise, the Bentley still stood outside the front door. Moreover, the light was on in the usual room on the ground floor, the curtains still not quite meeting in the middle.

‘Looks as if he’s still here,’ he observed. ‘I thought it likely, having a car, he would have pulled out.’

‘We’ve got his registration, so that wouldn’t have done him much good. He wouldn’t have got far. He probably realized that.’

‘Wait here a minute while I see if he’s in the room, and if so, what he’s doing.’ Biggles walked quietly to the lighted window. He took a quick peep and returned.

‘Well?’ queried the Inspector.

‘He’s in there.’

‘What’s he doing?’

‘Smoking a cigar and having a whisky and soda.’

‘Ah! He probably needs a drink after what’s happened.’

They walked on to the door. The Inspector tried it. ‘Not even locked,’ he whispered. ‘He must be pretty sure of himself. We’ll go in and come on him before he has time to do anything.’ He opened the door.

There was a light in the hall: a small paraffin lamp on a side table. The Inspector, being the only one in uniform, took the lead. A corridor led in the direction of the lighted room, revealed by a narrow strip of light at floor level. He stopped when he came to it, turned the handle, pushed the door open and, closely followed by the others, walked in.

The man they sought was sitting relaxed in an armchair, smoking a cigar with a drink at his elbow. He did not wait to be challenged. Rising to his feet he exclaimed wrathfully: 'What the hell do you mean by walking into my house as if it belonged to you?'

'Are you Sir Humphrey Trethallan?' asked the Inspector calmly.

'Yes, I am. What do you want, barging in on me at this hour?'

The Inspector, in the best official manner, remained unruffled. 'I'd be obliged, sir, if you'd come with me to Bodmin.'

'What the devil for?'

'I thought you might help me by answering some questions.'

'To Bodmin! Now! Questions! What about? Can't you ask them here?'

'If you prefer it that way. I have reason to believe this house has harboured a convict named Lewis, recently escaped from Dartmoor prison.'

'Are you out of your mind, man?' cried Trethallan, with a well-affected show of incredulity and indignation.

The Inspector went on imperturbably. 'I also have reason to think you were with Lewis on Bodmin Moor tonight for the purpose of helping him to get out of the country.'

'Get him out of the country?' Trethallan's voice rose high with simulated astonishment. 'I don't know what you're talking about. I've never heard of this man Lewis, much less seen him. Why in God's name should I help a crook to get anywhere?'

Biggles stepped forward, speaking. 'I'm Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth of Scotland Yard. I suggest you helped Lewis because you were paid to do it. You arranged for an aircraft to pick him up on the moor. The plane, the pilot, and Lewis, are under arrest.'

Trethallan laughed and finished his drink. 'That's a good one. How did you dream it up?'

'It's no use, Sir Humphrey,' said Biggles. 'It's no dream and you know it. I've been watching things here for some time. I've seen you, with Lewis, here, in this room.'

'Indeed! How did you manage that?'

'You were a bit careless with your curtains.'

Intuitively Trethallan's eyes went to the window. 'Yes, that *was* careless,' he agreed. 'I was always going to get a new pair but somehow I never got round to it.'

The Inspector said: 'Come along, sir. We're wasting time.'

Trethallan's manner suddenly changed. 'All right. You say you saw Lewis here. How are you going to prove it?' he sneered, looking at Biggles.

'You were seen counting the notes that were the proceeds of the robbery for which he was sent to Dartmoor. I believe I'm right in saying you took him in your car to fetch it from where he'd hidden it.'

'Prove it.'

'That shouldn't be too difficult,' Biggles said.

In dead silence, in a few strides he crossed the room to the fireplace. Taking hold of the carved head on the panelling on the left-hand side he pulled on it. It came out, revealing a cavity. Reaching inside he took out a bundle of bank-notes, held together by a strip of paper such as is used by banks. He tossed it on the table. 'How do you account for this?' he asked quietly. 'This is part of the money Lewis paid you for helping him. The numbers of the stolen notes are known.'

Here, actually. Biggles was taking a chance, because in fact he did not know for certain that the numbers of the notes were known. There had been no time to find out, but it could soon be checked. Trethallan wouldn't know, either.

Anyway, Trethallan must have believed this, for he abandoned bluffing. 'For God's sake! You *have* been busy,' he scoffed.

'Come along, sir,' said the Inspector again, a trifle impatiently.

'I'm not going anywhere,' Trethallan muttered. Moving like a cat, before anyone could stop him he had opened a drawer in the table and snatched out a revolver. 'Now what are you going to do about it?' he grated, glaring at Biggles.

Biggles shook his head sadly. 'It's no use. That isn't going to help you.'

'We'll see about that.'

'Look behind you.'

Trethallan snatched a quick glance over his shoulder and saw Algy, gun in hand, covering him. When he looked back at Biggles, he, too, held a gun.

'Put that gun down. Sir Humphrey,' advised Biggles. 'You haven't a chance.'

For a second Trethallan hesitated. A gleam of sardonic humour came into his eyes. 'Got it all nicely tied up, haven't you?' he said mockingly. 'Well, no one shall ever say I didn't know when I was beaten, or that I was a bad loser.' Then, before anyone could guess what he was going to do he had put the muzzle of revolver in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

There was a muffled report, and he crumpled like suit of clothes falling from a hook. A pale wreath of blue powder smoke drifted up.

For a moment nobody moved. The Inspector's face was white. 'My God! Who'd have thought he'd do that?'

Biggles shrugged. 'He was that sort of man. He must have known the game was up, and he preferred this way to going to prison.'

The Inspector walked to the body and bent over him. 'No use calling a doctor,' he said grimly. 'He's blown the back of his head off.' He looked at Biggles with extraordinary expression on his face. 'It was you producing those notes that did it. How the devil did you know they were there?'

'That can wait. I'll tell you later. There are more in the drawer. With what Lewis had with him it should be the lot. Let's get this messy business cleared up.'

'I'll get the body to the mortuary,' said the Inspector. 'Where's the

telephone? There must be one in the house somewhere.'

Ginger answered. 'It's in the hall. I saw it as we came in.'

The Inspector went out. He was soon back. 'That's fixed,' he stated. 'An ambulance is on its way here. I'll take care of this. There's no need for you fellows to stay if you don't want to. I can ride home in the ambulance.'

'That suits me,' replied Biggles. 'In that case we'll get along. I'll see you at the station in the morning. I'd like a word with that pilot if you don't mind. At the same time I can tell you the whole story.'

'That's all right with me. I shall be interested to know how you got on to this.' The Inspector picked up the fatal gun.

'I'd be careful with that,' Biggles said.

'Any particular reason?'

'There's a chance that it may turn out to be the gun that fired the bullet that killed your Constable Harley. The ballistics experts should be able to tell us. Harley was on the moor the night he was murdered. It was partly that which brought us here.'

At this juncture the door was opened and an elderly woman came in. Seeing the body on the floor she threw up her hands, screamed and rushed out again.

'I'll attend to her,' the Inspector said.

'Who is it — his wife?'

'No. He wasn't married. We saw her when we came to search the house. She said she was his housekeeper.'

Biggles nodded. 'Okay. I'll get along for a spot of blanket drill.'

'What's that?'

'Bed,' answered Biggles, succinctly. 'I've lost a lot of beauty sleep lately. Come on, chaps.'

Leaving the Inspector there they walked to the car and were soon on their way to Bodmin. They travelled for the most part in silence, but on the main road Algy asked a question. 'What makes a man like Trethallan, born with a silver spoon in his mouth so to speak, make a complete mess of his life and then end it himself?'

Biggles answered: 'There must have been a flaw somewhere in his make-up. It's likely that when he was a young man he had too much money. That tends to make a fellow think he's smarter than he is. That wise King Solomon knew something when he said: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." But who are we to criticize? We all suffer from it, more or less.' He drove on.

Reaching the hotel and having parked the car, as they went in Biggles said: 'There's one little job you can do for me, Ginger, before we hit the hay. Ring the Air Commodore and tell him not to worry. The bird is roosting on Bodmin Moor. You'll find me in the bar having a snack and a drink.'

When, some minutes later, Ginger joined him he reported: 'No use. I couldn't get him. I spoke to Mrs Raymond. She said she didn't expect her husband back for some time.'

‘No matter. There’s no great hurry. It’ll do in the morning. You and Algy can have a lie-in, if you like. You must be tired. I shall be along early to see how Bertie’s getting on.’

The following morning he was first down. Going through to the breakfast room, to his utter astonishment he found Air Commodore Raymond there, sipping coffee.

‘Hello, sir. What are you doing here?’ he asked, sitting next to him.

‘I found I was able to get away, so I ran down, travelling overnight, to see how you were getting on. We shall soon have to do something.’

‘There’s nothing more to be done but the tidying up,’ Biggles said. ‘We rang you up last night to tell you that Trethallan had shot himself and the intruder was under arrest; but you weren’t in.’

‘Good heavens! I was on my way here. What happened?’

Over breakfast Biggles narrated the events of the previous night. ‘How many crooks Trethallan has managed to get out of the country we may never know; but at the finish it was a case of once too often.’

‘Why did he do it?’

‘Money. What else? I imagine he was interested only in crooks who had a pile of swag tucked away. The underworld must have known about it. Lewis knew where to make for as soon as he broke gaol. He was carrying a load of notes when we picked him up. The police have the lot.’

‘What are you going to do now?’

‘First I’m going to the hospital to see Bertie. He took a nasty crack on the skull. Afterwards I shall go along to the police station. I told the Inspector I’d be along early to help him get things sorted out. After that I shall go to the moor to have a closer look at the plane. I couldn’t see much of it in the dark.’

‘What make is it?’

‘I don’t know. Foreign job. Continental dashboard.’

‘We shall have to find out where it was based.’

‘Unless we can get the pilot to talk that will be difficult. It’s a marine aircraft — or rather, amphibious, wheels through floats. I haven’t seen one of those for years. Thinking it over last night it struck me that the machine may not be shore-based.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘It could have come from a ship. Kept below deck and put up on the water by a crane when required, as they used to do in the Navy before there were aircraft carriers.’

The Air Commodore thought for a moment. ‘I think the best thing would be to ask the Research Establishment to collect it. They should be able to work out where it was built.’

‘That suits me.’ Biggles got up. ‘Now, if you don’t mind, sir, I’ll slip along and see Bertie.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ said the Air Commodore.

There is not much more to be told. To inquiries at the hospital they were given the usual answer: 'As well as could be expected.' Bertie was sleeping comfortably and it would be better not to disturb him.

They went on to the police station to learn that Lewis was already on his way back to Dartmoor. Thoroughly disgruntled he had refused to say anything. When told that Trethallan had shot himself he had merely said: 'Serves the fool right. If he hadn't made a mucker of it I wouldn't be here.'

The pilot of the aircraft was equally unco-operative. He sat in his cell in sullen silence. Biggles told him it might be to his advantage to talk; but he refused to open his mouth. He declined to give his name and nationality. He carried no passport or any other means of identification. All he had in his pocket was the remains of a packet of American cigarettes, which can, of course, be bought anywhere.

'He may talk when he's had more time to think things over, and sees where he's landed himself,' said the Air Commodore after they had left the cell.

Biggles told the full story of his investigations to the Inspector. The Air Commodore, who did not know the details, listened with absorbed attention.

'What about this old mine?' asked the Inspector. 'Don't you want to go down it?'

'No, thank you,' replied Biggles. 'I'm nothing for mines, old or new. I'll leave that to you.'

It may as well be said here that nothing unexpected was found in the mine. From the remains of some food it had apparently been used simply as a place to wait for the plane. Short-wave radio equipment told its own story. As suspected, the aerial, which was in the old chimney stack, could be raised or lowered as occasion required. The passage used as an escape route was in fact an old ventilation shaft.

Biggles and his chief went on to the plane, still standing where it had been left in charge of a constable. They learned little from it. In view of what the Air Commodore had suggested about its disposal, they did not spend much time on it. 'We'll get a full report on it in due course from the Research people,' he said. 'Now I must be getting back to town. The Air Minister will be delighted to know there won't be any more night intrusions — not with this machine, anyway. Are you coming back with me?'

'If you don't mind, sir, I'll hang on here for a few days till Bertie's on his feet; then we can all come back together.'

'Do that,' agreed the Air Commodore. 'Which reminds me. Where are the rest of your party?'

'I told them they needn't hurry about getting up,' explained Biggles. 'We've put in quite a lot of overtime since we arrived in Cornwall.'

Thus ended the affair of the mysterious intruder, the plane that came by night to worry more than one Government department; although, to be sure, its purpose, while serious, proved to be less sinister than had been feared. Its

arrest not only ended its criminal career, but, as Biggles had suspected from the outset, solved the mystery of the murdered constable: for the ballistic experts were able to prove that the bullet which had killed the policeman had been fired from the revolver that had at the finish ended the life of its owner. Just how that had come about could only be conjectured, for the man who had fired the fatal shot was beyond the reach of justice.

THE END